Delayed

by Qym

When Regina's flight is delayed, she finds herself tugged along on a vacation she never planned for. Swan Queen. Cover by i-heart-regina-mills(tumblr). Now complete.
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Chapter 1

Regina slapped her ticket down on the counter. Her dark leer was making the poor petite blonde behind the computer cower – all the better, she thought, to get an upgrade and a free meal out of this catastrophe.

"You mean to tell me that the flight I paid seven-hundred-and-eighty-four dollars for is delayed?" She leaned closer. "Is that truly what you mean to tell me?"

The woman licked her lips. Regina's eyes darted down to the crooked nametag and snorted. This 'Amanda' creature wouldn't last five minutes in any real job. Amanda cleared her throat and nodded. "I'm afraid-"

"Clearly," Regina interrupted. "What do you plan to do in order to compensate me for wasting my valuable time?"

"Lady, you really need to calm down."

Regina's head whipped sideways and so that she could glare at the interloper – the smiling blonde woman made the breath catch in her throat. She grumbled to make sure she still could control herself and then responded, "You really need to mind your own business."

"I will – as soon as you can talk to this poor woman who's just doing her job without screaming in her face."

"I do not scream."

The woman's smirk deepened. "Is that so?"

"I have no idea what you're implying; however, I refuse to-"

"Relax?" The woman set a hand on Regina's wrist. "I'm Emma. Why don't you let me get you a drink?"

"A drink will not get me to my meeting in a timely manner."

"Maybe not, but it'll make the in-between a little nicer." Emma pulled gently on her arm. "So come on. Leave Amanda here alone. There's nothing she can do. She's not paid enough to be your emotional punching bag."

Regina frowned. "I demand-"

"I'm sure you demand a lotta things. Why don't you find out what sort of needs I can fulfill."

Swallowing back her sudden embarrassment at the innuendo in Emma's words, Regina tilted her head up and nodded curtly. "Very well. But I drink only the best."

"I'm sure my wallet can take it." Emma slipped her hand around Regina's waist and guided her away from Amanda, who shot Emma a very thankful glance.

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Regina examined Emma from the blonde's ugly black boots to the weathered leather jacket zipped halfway up – and then brought her gaze to Emma's face. Emma snorted and slid a shot glass across the counter. The clear liquid inside nearly sloshed over the side and Regina picked it up delicately. After a hesitant, disdainful sniff, she narrowed her eyes.

"The bar is closed."

"Maybe for most people." Emma leaned over the counter and placed the vodka bottle back into its place. "But I'm not most people."

"I suppose you're not. Most people would have some sense of fashion and decorum."

Emma went to a refrigeration unit, snagged a beer from it, and smirked as she cracked it open. "What do you think I am?"

"A thief."

"Not anymore." To prove her point, she dug her wallet out with her spare hand and tossed a fifty onto the counter. "Guess again."

Regina's eyes raked once more over Emma's form. "Have you been to prison?"

"Once."

"So you're a hoodlum."

"Arguably." Emma took a long swig and then licked her lips. "Any other guesses?"

Regina huffed. "That's all. I don't think there's anything more to you."

"If only they'd look closer," Emma responded. "Would they see a poor boy? No siree. They'd find out-"

"Do people find this charming?"

"Generally speaking." Emma tapped the shot glass with her beer bottle. "Go on. It's paid for."

Regina sniffed it once more and then knocked it back. Despite her reservations, it had just the burn she was looking for and it slid smoothly down her throat. Rather than praise Emma, though, she simply set the glass aside and tried to continue looking affronted.

Emma set her bottle down and traced her finger around its mouth. "So why were you harassing Amanda?"

"I'm going to be late for my meeting."

"So? Sometimes life happens."

"Is that how you ended up in prison?"

Emma barked out a short laugh. "Something like that."

"Interesting." She wasn't nearly drunk enough for this, Regina thought. She cocked an eyebrow and tilted her head toward her glass. Catching her drift, Emma sighed and leaned back over the counter for the bottle of vodka.

"You always this much of a booze hound?" Emma poured the liquor

with a steady hand, though her eyes were on Regina's humorless smile. When the stoic woman didn't deign to answer, Emma took the shot glass and drained its contents before Regina could even stutter out a complaint. "Tell me about yourself and you'll earn another shot."

"This wasn't our agreement." Regina wanted to use Emma's name but refused to be informal. She would never be caught dead fraternizing with an ex-convict, especially one so questionably dressed. "If you're through providing alcoholic distractions, then I may as well return to my original-"

"Leave Amanda alone," Emma said. She grabbed Regina's wrist to keep Regina from leaving and tugged gently. "What's the harm in telling me one little thing?"

The harm was, Regina wanted to say, in letting a complete stranger know intimate details about hers. She hardly let her friends know such things about her. Well, if she had any real friends, they wouldn't know, she amended. Every person in her life was after something – and this blonde was no different. She would simply keep things vague until she could ascertain Emma's purpose.

"I am a very important person."

"I can tell from your designer shoes, expensive purse, and haughty attitude." Emma tossed the shot glass from hand to hand. "Tell me something I don't know."

"Again, this wasn't our agreement."

"As the current holder of the booze, I think I make the rules."

Regina frowned. "I'll walk out of here."

"So why don't you?" Emma countered. "There's the door."

Regina folded her arms over her chest. She couldn't admit that there was something charmingly smooth about Emma – a suave something that drew her interest. She grumbled and replied, "I suppose sitting with you and alcohol is the lesser of two evils when compared to the sweaty masses out there."

"Glad to know I'm at least somewhat better than a family of four with a glandular problem and no sense of personal space. Did you see them, by the way? Normally I wouldn't say anything, but now that you mention it – someone oughta tell them there is a non invasive surgery available to-"

"Enough." Regina held her hand out. "If I'm to put up with your prattle I'll need another shot."

Emma complied and Regina grimaced at the obvious lip marks on the glass. Emma noted the expression and barely withheld her laughter. "What's wrong, princess?"

"Princess?" Regina scoffed, "I'm a queen."

"Now that's something I didn't know, but could really get behind." Emma took the glass back, her fingers purposely gliding over Regina's. "Or under."

"Lewd."

"Sorry." Emma wasn't sorry – especially after watching the color rise in the fiery woman's cheeks. "Any more fun facts about you?"

"No."

"I'm heading to Maine for a funeral," Emma stated. She ignored Regina's disinterest and continued onward. "My grandfather died."

"Would you like a cookie?"

Emma poured herself a drink. "The rules are information and then drink. In that order. No exceptions."

Regina watched the liquid disappear. "You are aware that you drank your beer first."

"Beer before liquor," Emma supplied, "never been sicker."

"You're highly intelligent."

"I know." Emma shrugged. "But I've done enough drinking in my

time that I know what my body can handle. Is that a fact? Can I drink to that?"

"It's my turn," Regina snapped. "I'm the vice president of a very influential corporation."

"I did not know that." Emma obliged Regina's glare with another shot. "See? That's not too bad is it?"

Regina blinked slowly, aware that she was fast approaching her limits. She was not a heavy drinker – a glass of wine with dinner was her usual fare and this vodka was making her dizzy. She hiccuped, threw her fingers over her lips, and bit her tongue.

"Are you okay?" Emma stepped closer and set a hand on Regina's shoulder. Though Regina flinched, Emma wasn't deterred. She met Regina's cold gaze with worried eyes. This was supposed to be a way of helping Regina loosen up and relax – not give the woman alcohol poisoning. "Do we need to slow down?"

"Get your hands off me."

Emma let go as requested. "I'm not trying to hurt you."

Regina lifted her head proudly. "Your designs upon me are irrelevant."

"I'm not designing anything upon you."

"I'm certain."

"Sarcasm?"

"Everyone is after something," Regina stated. Her tongue felt thick. As her eyes roved Emma's body more openly, she regretted her willingness to participate in this asinine game. Her inhibitions kept her safe – and kept others safe as well. Mother disliked dalliances, she reminded herself, especially flings with people of lesser caliber. This was an opportunity for a scandal after all, and she had no interest in embarrassing herself or her family because this attractive blonde woman was buying her drinks.

Emma nodded. "Yeah, okay. You caught me."

"Ah," Regina responded, hating the way she sounded disappointed. She didn't know this woman. There was no reason to expect that she'd be any different than the other people Regina had ever met.

"I'd like to get to know you because you seem like you could really use a friend."

"I have no need for such-"

"Everyone needs a friend."

"I have friends."

"Name three." Emma lifted her eyebrows and waited with her hands jammed in her pockets.

Regina thought quickly. "Mr. Glass, Mr. Jones, and Ms. Mills."

Emma shook her head. "Don't these people have first names? How'd you meet them?"

"I don't have to justify my social life to you."

"I know you don't." Emma leaned against the bar. "But we've got like an hour to kill before the plane takes off and nothing better to do."

Regina wanted to hate this infuriating blonde woman who asked prying questions and thought she knew about Regina's life – but all Regina could muster was a vague irritation that Emma was feigning interest in her life. Mostly what she felt for Emma was a dull ache between her legs that she was rather unaccustomed to. It was the alcohol, she reminded herself. She wouldn't be feeling such degrading things if Emma hadn't pumped her full of shots. This was Emma's fault – and Emma would gain nothing further from her.

"My name is Regina."

Emma bit back her laugh as she watched dismay cross Regina's features. While saving Amanda was definitely her purpose in this little exchange, she was growing to really enjoy Regina's candid

reactions. From what Emma could glean, Regina wasn't used to drinking heavily or explaining herself to anyone. Emma found that she got a kick out of encouraging both behaviors.

"Nice to meet you, Regina." Emma extended her hand, but Regina knocked it away.

"I gave you my name, not permission to touch me."

"Oh?" Emma couldn't stop her waggled eyebrows. "And what'll it take to convince you to give me that?"

Regina tittered and immediately look appalled. "I'm afraid there's no possible way for that outcome to become a reality."

Emma lifted her hands. "I had to try."

"Is that how you ended up in prison?"

"Are you going to keep asking that until I tell you?"

"Yes." Regina frowned. "No. I don't care a whit about your personal background, nor have I any interest in your present or future plans."

Emma pressed her hands to her chest. "Lighten up, okay? Pretend for a second that the world doesn't exist outside this bar, huh? I don't even know what your last name is, so it's not like I could ever ruin your family name by telling your prized secrets to the press… Uh, does the press even care about any of this?"

"Of course," Regina snapped. "I'm a very important person."

"Uh-huh."

"My point stands, Regina. Besides, even if I did know who you are, I'm not interested in dragging your name through the mud. I am interested in dragging-"

"Do not finish that thought."

"Okay, point taken." Emma sighed and smiled. "But I'll tell you about how I landed in prison if you want."

"In exchange for what?"

"Not everything has a price."

Regina rolled her eyes, disbelief plastered on her face. "Very well."

"I was just a kid, really. Well, seventeen – but that's still a kid in my book. My boyfriend at the time had stolen some watches a while back and we had this crazy plan that we were going to sell them and start a new life in a place where nobody knew who we were. It was this sorta romantic thing that only sounds possible to stupid kids."

"Intelligence has nothing to do with that sort of dream," Regina murmured. When she realized she'd spoken out loud and that Emma was suddenly looking at her with fresh curiosity, she scowled.

"Anyway… the problem was that the cops knew he'd stored 'em in this locker at a train station. We both knew he couldn't go in and get them without getting caught, so he sent me in. I took the key and I walked in. None of the security people there batted an eye. I thought I was gonna get away with it. It was working out so perfectly. I found the locker. I slid the key in and unlocked it. I opened it up and took the watches out. And then the cops had my face pressed to the tile floor."

"And what happened to your boyfriend?"

"He realized what happened and fled. I tried telling the cops that the watches weren't mine – that I was being forced to get them for him – but with him gone, they needed to charge someone. That someone was me."

"You do realize you were guilty, correct?"

"Yeah. I know I was up to some shifty business – I'm just sore that he got away with it and I went to jail." Emma folded her arms over her chest. "It's just not fair."

"Life's not fair."

"Personal experience?"

"Yes." Regina stared at the bottle of liquor with great longing in her eyes. If she didn't feel so entirely out of control already, she'd want to work on finishing it. But one of her many skills was impeccable self-control. She reached for the bottle, but Emma's hand landed on her wrist again.

"Wanna talk about it?"

"I want to forget this conversation even happened."

Emma snorted and tugged her across the bar to one of the myriad tables scattering the small room. They were filthy, Regina thought, but didn't utter a single complaint as Emma got her seated at one and pushed a small bowl of peanuts at her.

"Well, if we're just gonna forget about this conversation, there's no harm in having it in the first place, huh? So tell me, Regina… What's not fair about your life? You're very important, y'know?"

Regina picked a peanut up and fiddled with it. She supposed the risk of harm was relatively low considering that her conversational partner, despite a stint in prison, seemed to be useless and a little slow. Also attractive, her brain reminded her. Her heart thudded a little faster in agreement. Besides, this would be a good deal cheaper than an appointment with her psychologist in L.A.

"I have never been allowed to do as I please."

"Yeah?"

"My life was predetermined the moment I was conceived." Regina kept her tone flat. She had spent years practicing the art of being completely detached and disinterested from emotionally volatile subjects. It wasn't as if her mother was interested in hearing about her feelings. "I have missed several opportunities because they were not deemed suitable for my interests."

"Damn. That really sucks." Emma bit back her follow-up innuendo. While she liked teasing the other woman with come-ons, she recognized that the conversation was taking a serious turn.

"That is, I suppose, one way of putting it."

Regina sat very still in a vain attempt to keep her head steady - she was conscious that she was motionless, but her vision wobbled nonetheless. Still, she was proud that she wasn't slurring her words too badly and Emma seemed oblivious to how truly inebriated she was.

"So…" Emma cleared her throat and flushed. "I guess talking to me was a little – not in the grandiose Plan of Regina's Life?"

"Hardly."

"Have you ever thought about, I dunno, doing what you want for a weekend?"

"Hm?"

"You're already going to miss your meeting, right?" Emma bounced excitedly in her seat. "So why not just say fuck it for the weekend?"

"First of all," Regina stated slowly, making sure to enunciate every word, "I would never use such coarse language."

"Second of all, just think about it. One weekend to be totally off the map. To figure out what you think is fun. What you want from your life. Three nights and two days to just be yourself, without all that pressure that seems to be on your shoulders all the time." Emma leaned closer. "And I know just the place for your mini vacation."

"Didn't you say you were heading to a funeral?"

Emma shrugged. "Well, yeah. But I'm spending the weekend back in my home town. It totally fits the bill of what you need, I promise. Most people haven't heard of it – even people who live in Maine have no idea it exists."

"Sounds… quaint."

"Oh yeah." Emma grinned. "Quaint and quiet and off the map. I mean, we've got internet and cell service and whatever, but-"

"Why should I go with you?" Regina swayed slightly and tilted her head. "I've got important things to be doing-"

"Yup, you're a very important person, I know. But even important people need vacations, right?"

"You haven't answered my question."

"Because… I kinda don't want to go to the funeral alone, okay?"

"Everyone wants something." Regina folded her arms over her chest. "Was that your entire purpose in pulling me aside?"

Emma threw her hands in the air. "Of course not! I didn't even think of it until just now. But it sorta solves both our problems, doesn't it?"

"You mistake my responsibilities as problems."

"Well, they are, in a way." Emma smirked. "And besides, I promise I can show you a good time."

"Believe me, I am very aware of what you want to show me."

Emma snorted. "I like your sense of humor, Regina. And you'll like my-"

"If I agree, will you halt your constant innuendo, or will it merely intensify?"

"Why don't you agree and find out?"

Regina knew it was the alcohol making questionable decisions for her, but she nodded curtly. She didn't know what this would entail, but she was just drunk enough to not care. If her mother complained, she would blame Emma. The blonde seemed like the sort who could take care of herself.

"You are responsible for meeting all my needs."

"Oh I plan to."

"There will be no shenanigans."

Emma's smirk faded as she nodded seriously. "Gotcha. You don't owe me anything except going with me to that funeral. You do that,

and I'll show you a great time in the middle of nowhere. You'll want for nothing."

Though she was still suspicious of Emma's motives, Regina stuck her hand out. When Emma shook it firmly, Regina said, "It's a deal."

Emma set her hand against her thigh and tried to ignore the happy tingles that resulted from touching Regina. She had just promised to behave herself and she was going to respect Regina's wishes. No matter how hot Regina was. This wasn't about her own gratification, but Regina's self-discovery. Damn, though, Emma thought, if it wasn't going to be a long weekend.

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Chapter 2

Emma helped Regina to her feet when the speaker system announced that their flight was finally ready to board. Regina groused angrily, but unintelligibly, as Emma practically dragged her back out into the masses of disgruntled passengers. The only thing that waived Regina's grumbling was the sight of Emma waving something and getting them onto the plane before the rest of the passengers. Her brain struggled momentarily, but eventually gave up. Whatever Emma had done was irrelevant. They were finally on the blasted plane.

"I will s-see you at the end of the flight," Regina announced. She flopped down into one of the first class seats and pulled the window shade down.

Emma sat beside her. "I hope you don't snore."

Regina wasn't sure what insulted her more – that Emma had the gall to sit next to her, or the implication that she was so unladylike as to snore. She sputtered for a moment before snorting and shutting her eyes. These were matters to which she would attend once sober.

"You better not disturb me."

"I won't."

Regina snuggled down in her chair, pleasantly drunk and weirdly at ease with Emma so close. She could hear the other passengers filing past them, but she was able to mostly block out their inane chatter. She was a master of focus and determination. If she wanted to ignore something, that something would feel as if it didn't truly exist. Like Emma, she thought. The woman was probably perturbed that she wasn't paying any attention – she pried an eye open and found Emma flipping through the SkyMall magazine without any signs of distress.

"Well?"

Emma glanced over. "Well what?"

"Are you really just going to sit there the whole plane ride?"

"You told me no funny business… Unless you've changed your mind?"

Regina narrowed her eyes. "I will not stand for you pestering me."

"Right," Emma confirmed. "So I'm not pestering you."

"So you'll agree to leave me alone?"

Emma flipped a page in the magazine, trying to use her silence as an answer. Dissatisfied with this response, Regina repeated her question in a firmer tone. With a slight roll of her eyes, Emma nodded.

"If it'll make you happy, I'll leave you alone."

"Am I not interesting?"

"You're very interesting. But I'll respect your wishes."

Regina melted back into her seat and stared at the loading passengers. They wouldn't leave her alone, she thought. They would harass her about every little thing – they would regal her with commentary about their lives and their trips. Once they learned of her wealth, they would ask for financial tips, or a job – but this blonde heathen beside her was going to leave her alone.

"I thought you liked me."

"I do like you," Emma responded. Humor laced her tone. She flipped the next page, despite not seeing a single thing on the previous page. She was beginning to get the idea that Regina wanted her attention. "But you just said you wanted me to leave you alone."

"So now you're going to respect my wishes?"

"We shook on it, Regina. I'm to show you a good time and keep my hands to myself. I'm trying to do exactly what you told me to."

"Hmph."

"Why don't you close your eyes?" Emma smiled as gently as she could. "You'll be a little more sober later – and a little less-"

"You got me this way. You deal with it."

Emma felt like she'd gotten Regina pregnant instead of drunk. She snorted. "Alright. So tell me, Regina, what do you want me to talk to you about?"

"You're in charge of entertaining me. You figure it out."

"Tell me about your family."

"You're assuming I have one."

"Most people have a family of some sort."

"I don't want to talk about them."

"Okay…" Emma lifted the magazine again, feeling like she would never find something Regina wanted to talk about – so the effort in trying would be wasted. Anyways, there was a fairly interesting looking penguin-shaped mini fridge half way down the page.

After several moments, Regina leaned back in her seat, rolled her eyes up, and sighed heavily. "Very well. Because you are so intensely interested in my private life, I suppose I can pander to your whims this once."

"Hm?"

"My mother is Cora Mills. She is a matriarch in all senses of the word. My father is Henry, otherwise known as Mr. Cora Mills."

"Wait a second…"

"What?" Regina snapped. Here she was – baring her soul and revealing details that she really shouldn't – and Emma was interrupting. The nerve of some people.

"Earlier you said one of your friends was a Ms. Mills. Please, please, please don't tell me you were talking about your mother."

Regina frowned. "Of course not."

"Then who were you talking about?"

"What's your point?" Regina hated squirming; she wasn't about to let this ingrate make her feel somehow lesser. "I suppose you don't value familial relationships, but those of us with morals and a conscience-"

"Whoa." Emma lifted a hand. "I just meant that mothers are, well, mothers."

"You wouldn't count your mother as a friend?"

"I haven't for a very long time. Ten years, actually."

"How old are you?" Regina wished she could curb her tongue. She was interested in Emma, or at least in their discussion, but, under normal circumstances, she would never see the point.

"Twenty eight."

"Young."

"Oh come off it." Emma forgot her promise momentarily and let her gaze slide down Regina's figure. "You don't look a day over thirty."

"The Mills women have always aged well."

"How old are you?"

"Never ask a woman her age."

"Well, I've never been big on manners. So?"

"Why do you no longer consider your mother your friend?" Regina countered, her lips wobbling into an unsteady smile. She ought to be smirking, she thought, but the alcohol was dulling the edge of her sass. She also should have given Emma a tongue lashing for the personal questions – but all she could do was think about the innuendo Emma would make if she said the words 'tongue' and 'lashing.' Her smile intensified before she could flatten her

expression once more.

Emma watched the peculiar flickering of emotions and was very curious as to what caused them. The smile faded too quickly, though, and she decided to simply answer the question. "The kid was born and he really shifted the whole dynamic of the family."

"You have a ten year old brother?"

"He's a good kid." Emma shifted uncomfortably to watch the last of the boarding passengers shuffle past them. "But when he was born, my mom suddenly decided it was time to be a mom instead of a friend."

Regina wasn't quite sure how to respond to that and the haze hanging over her brain certainly wasn't helping. "I'm sure your brother is grateful for that."

"Maybe."

"My mother was quite strict," Regina revealed, "but that's what children need. No child knows what is best for herself, after all. Children thrive with structure and rules, not anarchy and friendship."

Emma winced. "Well, I mean…"

"I didn't mean to say-" Regina cleared her throat. "I'm sure you had quite the pleasant childhood."

"I was their princess – my mom had some cysts on her uterus, so they never thought she could have a kid, so when I came along, they thought I was their little miracle. If I wanted to draw on the walls, they let me draw on the walls. If I wanted to throw a tantrum in the middle of a restaurant, they bought me ice cream. So really, I was a terror, not a princess."

Regina settled back into her seat. The woman next to her hardly looked like any sort of terror. Emma had a kind face, she decided, and didn't seem like the type of person who was a monstrous child. She pondered briefly the idea of Emma as a juvenile delinquent. In Regina's imagination, Emma had been a gangly kid comprised of sharp angles rather than luscious curves, a sly smirk on wry lips,

and a black leather jacket complete with silver buckles and interior pocket for cigarettes illegally obtained. Emma probably had a Zippo with flames painted with nail polish on the side.

"Anyway, I'd probably have to agree. Sometimes I do wonder what I'd be like if my parents had actually bothered raising me."

"I find it to be a waste of time to consider such impossibilities. Regardless of your origins, you are who you are today and all you can do is change who you will be tomorrow."

"You're deep when you're drunk."

"That's if you believe that people can honestly change." Regina hiccupped.

Emma frowned. "Well, do you think people are born bad?"

"No. I think people play the roles that are given to them."

"I don't really think people are born good, either." Emma wrinkled her nose. "So that means, at least in my perspective, that people are born blank slates. You change into whoever you become."

"Your point?"

"Change has to be possible for people, otherwise how did they become who they are?"

Regina rolled her eyes. "Well, yes, but then who they are solidifies and change is no longer an option. Excuse me for being trite, but you cannot teach an old dog new tricks."

"You're crotchety, stiff, and uptight. You really wanna be like that until you die?"

With no apparent hesitation, Regina jerked her head in the affirmative. "Yes."

"That's boring." Emma set her magazine completely aside, aware that she would probably not have a moment of peace and quiet until Regina fell asleep. She couldn't help but smirk at the thought that

she had somehow wrangled all of Regina's attention, despite Regina's complaints to the contrary. That was fine by her, as Regina's attention was somehow just what she wanted. "People who don't change are doomed, y'know? Life isn't static, and neither are people."

Regina shrugged her shoulders, an ungainly movement that didn't quite suit her – but the alcohol was still streaming through her system. She stilled herself and sniffed daintily. Much better, she thought. She may be drunk, but she didn't have to act like a simpleton or a brute. Emma was a brute. She was a lady.

"If you are not able to stand up for your fastidiously held beliefs, then what is your worth?"

"But you aren't your beliefs. Besides, those beliefs change, too."

"I suppose if you're weak."

Emma snorted. "It's not weak to understand that sometimes you're not quite right. There's no law that says that what you think today is what you have to think tomorrow, too. I think if you don't change a little bit every day, you're not doing it right."

"Ridiculous. Are you saying that I haven't been living my life appropriately?"

"That's what we're going to find out, isn't it?" Emma leaned a little closer, expecting Regina to pull back. When the brunette remained in place, Emma butted their noses together and grinned. "My way or your way, the smack down of lifestyles."

"Remove yourself from my person." Regina hated that she sounded somewhat breathless – as if Emma's presence had affected her in some positive way. She cleared her throat to try again, but got distracted by the playful glitter of Emma's eyes.

Regina let her eyes slide shut. She wasn't drowsy, but she hated when planes lifted into the air. The feeling of her stomach clenching and dropping was unpleasant; sooner or later, she thought, she'd have to fund some sort of teleportation research. It would be

wonderful to disappear in a puff of smoke and reappear at her final destination rather than going through this. Air travel was almost more trouble than it was worth. Hundreds of distasteful people, delayed flights, and then the actual horrible flight itself. She had been nervous on her way to the airport, though she'd never show that side of herself to anyone, and the delay had just been one more shitty thing to happen to her.

She pried one eye open a bit when Emma took her hand. With her head buzzing she couldn't quite figure out if Emma was another shitty thing, or someone actually worth her time. There was that damn magnetic draw she had to the other woman, but that was meaningless to her. People weren't important in her life because people were ephemeral and fleeting. Her control over others was tenuous at best; money and power, however, were much more consistent and couldn't be ripped from her hands. She was too sly for that and she had been brought up to think strategically. Everyone is a possible enemy, Mother had told her, but treat them as an ally until you are poised to strike.

Still, it was difficult to imagine Emma as an enemy any longer. Emma had been true to her word thus far and Regina found herself looking forward to this weekend. That was, she presumed, the alcohol talking. As the plane rumbled into the sky, she felt herself oddly comforted, though she wasn't sure if it was the depressants in the alcohol or Emma's warm hand over hers.

"You look a bit… sick." Emma stared at Regina and cocked an eyebrow. The other woman was paler than she ought to be and tinted a little greener than usual. The pallor wasn't becoming, though it was hard to say that anything about the other woman wasn't attractive. Emma found that she couldn't help but like people, no matter how much they eventually hurt her, but the draw to Regina was something else. "Can I help?"

"You are," Regina admitted.

"What's wrong?"

"Plane."

"Nothing's wrong with the plane." Emma glanced around. "You want me to get a flight attendant?"

"No."

Regina took three deep breaths and shook her head slowly. "It is merely a slow acclimation to the change in pressure-"

"You're afraid of flying."

"I am no such thing." The way her voice trembled at the end gave away her lie, and Emma rolled her eyes in response.

"Fear isn't a weakness."

"I renege my previous comment. You are no help whatsoever."

"Sorry."

"Just… stop talking."

"Okay…" Emma had no interest in resuming the reading of her magazine but had nothing else to distract her during their somewhat lengthy flight. She picked at the edges of the pages.

Within five minutes, Regina sighed. "Very well. What do you want to talk about?"

"It seems like we can't just leave each other alone, huh?" Emma smirked. "Something about me you like?"

"I like when you are silent."

"Apparently not."

"I dislike your fidgeting. Did your mother never tell you that idle hands are the devil's playthings?"

"Uh, no. Didn't we already go over this?"

Regina turned her gaze out the window. "I suppose."

"You're nervous about the flight," Emma guessed, "and you aren't

really able to think straight right now."

"It would explain my inexplicable desire to hear you blather on," Regina gritted out.

"Okay, so if we're going to talk, you have to promise that you won't be so uptight when I ask you simple questions about yourself. I'm not just going to sit here talking about myself and boring both of us, got it?" Emma extended her hand.

Regina ignored it. "Very well."

Emma let her hand drop. "So tell me about this really important business meeting you're going to miss."

"I-"

"And remember what you just agreed to."

"The meeting was to discuss terms of a merger." Regina relaxed as the plane hit its cruising altitude. She unclenched her hands and fixed her hair – though not a strand was out of place. "A rather major merger."

"My family's in some serious business. They were always disappointed that I wasn't interested in that sort of stuff."

"What is it that you do?"

"I'm a pilot." Emma winked at a passing flight attendant, who promptly smiled back. "I like the freedom of jetting from coast to coast. My parents hate it, but sometimes you just really need to get away, y'know?"

"You run from your problems."

"I wouldn't say that, exactly." Emma fidgeted. "It's just that I don't really dig serious confrontation. If the best option is for me to leave for a while, I'll totally do that. I'll come back, probably, but when things cool down."

"What made you become a pilot? From what were you running?"

Emma hesitated a moment. Regina noted the way Emma's eyes flashed to the side before Emma answered. "It was stifling… I grew up in a small town. Everyone knows everyone else's business and I just couldn't take it anymore. I had to get out."

Rather than call Emma's obvious lie, Regina settled back into her seat. "I see. I find confrontation very bracing myself. I thrive in such environments."

"Then it's nice you're in business. I'm sure you're as cutthroat as they come."

"I prefer to think of myself as well educated, savvy, and focused."

Emma rolled her eyes. "It wasn't meant as a negative thing. Cutthroat definitely equals really good for making your business thrive. You can't get very far if you give everything away, right?"

Regina sighed. "Quite honestly, I would prefer if my company had a not-for-profit aspect. We make several billion dollars annually, and I would like to give back to the community. A gesture of good will, as it were. However, my mother holds the purse strings and she would rather be rich than kind."

"So there is a heart in there."

"Of course there is," Regina snapped. "What is lacking is patience for idiocy."

"We're going to have a fun weekend, I can tell." Emma examined Regina's taut face and decided to relent. "Did you want some water?"

"I would like a water, yes." Regina bit back the second half of her sentence which portrayed her gratitude to the blonde for considering her needs. Never thank the help for doing what they ought to have been doing in the first place, her mother had told her. Despite her focus on this thought, her mouth moved of its own accord. "Thank you."

"You're welcome." Emma flagged a flight attendant down. "A water for the lady, please."

"Right away."

"Do you enjoy your job?" Regina waited until they were once again relatively alone before starting in on Emma once more.

"Yeah, otherwise I wouldn't be doing it. There's plenty to do in the world, so why do something that you hate?" Emma caught the subtle shift in Regina's posture and groaned. "Please don't tell me you hate your job."

"I don't hate my job."

"Well at least there's that… So what's with the shifty eyes and slouching shoulders?"

Regina bristled but eventually released the tension from her body with a puff of air. "I sometimes do wonder what business would be like if my mother were not running the show."

"You'll find out eventually, I guess." Realizing that her statement sounded a bit morbid, Emma shook her head. "I just mean that everyone retires. So sooner or later, someone else will be at the helm. Probably you, right?"

"I don't think so. Mother always made it clear that I wasn't what she wanted in a daughter."

"Well… that – uh – sucks."

"That's certainly one way of putting it."

"I'm not trying to make light of it. I just don't really know what else to say. Like, nothing I say will change anything, and I can't say something that'll suddenly make things better. But I just want you to know that I'm listening and I think it… sucks."

Regina fought the smile creeping onto her face and failed. "It is so rare in my life that I meet someone who listens."

"I come from a family of lovey-dovey chatterboxes. Whatever you do, don't tell my mom a secret. Half the town will know within an hour." Emma chuckled. It was one of the more annoying things

about her mom, in her opinion. She'd tell her mother about a boy she liked in second grade, and the next day, they'd be on a playdate together. It seemed the only thing the woman was capable of keeping secret was the one thing that could potentially ruin their family.

"I can't say I'm looking forward to meeting her." Regina accepted the water that was passed to her and took a long, slow sip. The buzzing in her head was gradually decreasing, and the water would no doubt help. If she could be sober when they landed, she would be very pleased.

"Why not?"

"You seem to have a certain distaste for her." Regina cut off the rest of her response. She liked Emma a good deal, she realized, and if someone were anything less than nice to the blonde, she knew she'd have an immediate problem with them. That had always been her problem, according to her mother – she decided much too quickly how she felt about other people and made questionable decisions based upon that judgment.

"I've got a long list of grievances, but I'm pretty sure everybody does for parents." Emma let out a heavy sigh. "It's just a matter of what you can ignore well enough to just get along during the holidays, right? But that doesn't mean my mom's a bad person. It just means that we have too much between us to ever be friendly again."

Regina nodded, feeling infinitely better due to the hydration. "I dare say my mother is a bad person. I hope you keep secrets better than your mother because I'm fairly certain I'd get fired if anyone found out I said that."

"She'd fire her own daughter?"

"In a heartbeat."

Emma whistled. "I'm not sure I'd like your mother much. There's some bad shit in my family, but I know we'd all drop everything if someone needed something. That's why I'm going back to this funeral, no matter how awkward and un-fun it's going to be. My mom

needs me."

"I wonder how that must feel."

"For the weekend, consider me family, huh? Know that I'd drop anything for you. I'd even drop to my knees, if you let me." Emma tried to use her innuendo to lighten the suddenly morose mood.

Regina snorted. "Your lines were much smoother when we were on land."

"Maybe you're just drunk now and can't fully understand just how majestic my come-ons are." Emma smirked. "Maybe I just swept you off your feet earlier and now you have higher expectations."

"Ridiculous."

"Slightly bit true?" Emma raised her eyebrows playfully. "Even just a little bit."

This time Regina didn't bother working against the smile; her face lit up naturally and Emma felt quite accomplished. Regina set a hand on Emma's lower arm and searched Emma's face with her gaze.

"I still don't understand why you'd drop everything for me. Why you're doing this for me."

"I'm feeling pretty shitty these days. I feel better when I help other people – or at least it distracts from my own problems. So yeah, I'm helping you, but it's to help me, too. It makes me hope that someone out there might do the same for me when I need it."

"Perhaps someone will."

"I can always dream, right?" Emma took the empty cup from Regina's fingers and fiddled with it. She bent it out of shape as she considered what her dreams were likely to be about for the next few nights. It was entirely inappropriate to think of Regina like that, especially given her promise, but the brunette was attractive and scathing, a combination that generally made Emma weak at the knees.

Regina made a note to herself that if things went well that weekend, she would find some way to reward Emma for a job well done. She ignored that she wouldn't normally do such a thing, and pushed away all the pesky thoughts surrounding why she felt so inclined to be nice to the blonde woman. She was a savvy business woman – not a sap who got a girlish crush on the first person to show her kindness.

Whatever drove her need to make Emma happy, it certainly wasn't a swelling emotion in her breast that felt something like fondness. The feeling made her uncomfortable. She therefore chose to bury it away. She was in charge of her feelings, not the other way around.

"Wake me when we arrive." Regina murmured. She shut her eyes, not paying attention to the way Emma's eyes were trained upon her face. She missed Emma's soft smile in favor of forcing herself to sleep off the rest of her buzz.

Emma leaned back and shut her eyes as well. "Fine, fine. Sleep well, Regina."

"If you wish for me to sleep, you need to be quiet."

"I'm trying to sleep, too."

"Well then you should have no problem being quiet."

"No problem at all."

"Good."

Emma pried an eye open, her smile widening. Regina just had to have the last word – and Emma was certain that sparks would fly when the sassy woman met her mother.

Chapter 3

Regina kept a wary eye on Emma's nervous pacing as they waited for their luggage at the carousel. The blonde had been the picture of calm until the plane had landed – and then suddenly, as if the east coast air was capable of setting off chemical reactions just by being inhaled, Emma had become a nervous wreck. Rather than ask Emma about it, Regina contented herself with watching the strange behavior with curious eyes and hands akimbo.

"When'll the bags start?" Emma ran a hand through her hair. She nibbled on the tip of her thumb. "I mean, they should have already seen that our flight was delayed, but still – they're going to go on and on about how I wasted their time. Like I could have planned for it, y'know?"

"Ms. Swan."

"I shoulda warned them, y'know? Like hey, I'm stuck at the airport, but you should already know that because you have access to the internet and have my flight number available."

"Emma."

"What?"

"The carousel started." Regina nodded her head at the whirring conveyor belt, where black bag after black bag popped out, slid down, and travelled around. She spotted hers and rescued it immediately. "Get yours so that we can get on with this weekend."

Emma wiped her hands on her pants. When her bag rattled along, she pulled it free and stood there awkwardly. "I don't suppose you'd mind if we took just a second?"

"Ms. Swan, I am leaving now, whether or not you're accompanying me."

"Alright, alright. Geeze, it's almost like you're used to being the boss." Emma managed a smile, though her tone was still tightly

controlled. "Well then, boss lady, let's go."

Regina followed Emma out to the curb where Emma whipped her cell phone out. She folded her arms over her chest, refusing to let her eyes scan down Emma's body. When her willpower failed, and she thoroughly appraised Emma's figure, she couldn't stop her mind from wandering off into the dark recesses of her imagination. Just as her imagination was heating up, Emma snapped the phone shut.

"They'll be here in a few minutes. Okay, so some last minute things you should know," Emma said. She shifted her weight from foot to foot and scanned the oncoming cars. "Don't tell them how we met, okay? That's kinda – not really the sort of thing my mom likes to hear about."

"Tell your mother how we met. I can do that."

"I said don't do that."

Regina smirked, enjoying how easily she could rile Emma up. She liked the power this gave her but relented. "Fine. What else?"

"My mother will want to know everything about you. She's nosy like that. But don't feel like you have to tell her anything."

"I am more than capable of holding my own."

Emma sighed. "It's just – your fun weekend does not include my family. So the parts that we have to spend with them, I just don't want it upsetting you."

Regina's smirk intensified. "I think it would be more prudent to order me not to harass your family, rather than to prep me for their attempted annoyances."

"What?"

"Ms. Swan, I am a business woman. I deal with yattering fools each and every day of my life. My mother has spent her life assuring me that I am better than the idiots around me and has taught me how best to deal with them."

"Uh…" Emma stood silently a moment, her mind at war. Part of her desperately wanted to see Regina lay into her mother – the other part worried that an initial battle would ruin the whole weekend. "Please don't deal with my family?"

"I make no promises." Regina tilted her head up.

"Please, Regina."

Feeling more confident now that she was in full control of her faculties, Regina laughed. "I like hearing you beg."

Emma's lips curled up. "I thought this was going to be a platonic weekend…?"

"You promised to behave yourself. I said no such thing."

Emma sputtered, her mind spinning off into the gutter. Regina enjoyed the slack-jawed look for a moment until a minivan squealed up to the curb. The back door slid open and a short, brown-haired boy sprinted out. His arms wound tightly around Emma's hips and his head buried against her belly.

"Emma! You're late!"

"I know, kid." Emma set a hand on his head, conscious of their audience. His hands curled into fists, so she knelt lower and hugged him back, her eyes closing as she did so. Regina tapped her foot against the ground; Emma cleared her throat. "Kid, this is Regina. Regina, this is Henry, otherwise known as the Kid."

Regina shook his readily extended hand, all the while glancing between siblings. Henry looked a good deal like Emma, she noted. Strong familial genes, she determined. "It's nice to meet you, Henry."

"Are you coming with us?"

"Yes."

"Mom's not going to be happy."

"You let me deal with Mom, okay?" Emma ruffled his hair. "Now, are you going to help us with our bags?"

He stuck his tongue out at her. "Gonna pay me?"

"Not a single penny." She nudged him. "But I won't tell Mom about last Christmas-"

His face blanched. "Okay, okay. Don't you dare."

Emma gestured for Regina to enter the vehicle. "Henry'll get it for you."

Regina dug into her pocket and withdrew a five dollar bill. She placed it into Henry's hand and smirked. "You'll never learn the value of your work if you're not properly paid for it."

"Better watch out, Emma," Henry teased. "I'm gonna fire you as sister, and hire her."

"Oh you'd just love that, wouldn't you?"

"Operation Cobra is now starting," he stated. "By the end of the weekend, Mom and Dad will be like, Emma who? Regina Swan."

Emma laughed, not because she doubted his statement, but because she really did like the sound of that. Her eyes flickered to Regina's face as she considered how that might come true. Regina Swan, she thought, or perhaps something with a hyphen.

Regina eased into the van and made awkward eye contact with the driver, a brunette with a pixie cut and narrowed eyes. She kept her expression bland and buckled herself in. Emma ducked in behind her and smiled at the driver.

"Hey, Ma."

"Emma. Who's this?"

"My friend Regina. Regina, this is my mother Mary-Margaret."

"Mrs. Swan. Why's she here?"

"She's here for moral support." Emma turned her gaze to the car's other front seat occupant. "Regina, this is my pops, David. Dad, how're you?"

He grinned widely. "I'm doing well, duck."

"Duck?" Regina murmured to Emma, who waved her off. She'd have to wait for an answer she presumed. "If it's too much of a burden, you may simply drop me off at a nearby hotel-"

"We're not doing that," Emma interrupted. "Ma, I promised her a good time this weekend. If you drop her off, you're dropping me off, too."

Mary-Margaret's face tightened. "Emma…"

"Mags, why don't we get home?" David set a hand on her forearm. "We'll have dinner, and everyone can get to know each other."

"Fine." Mary-Margaret sighed, her shoulders lowering as the tension was forced from her body. As soon as Henry had slammed the hatchback and scrambled into the backseat, she shifted into traffic. Regina gripped the side panel of the van, unsure of if the other woman was actually licensed.

David twisted around. "Henry, why don't you tell Emma about how school's going?"

"She doesn't want to hear about that."

Regina watched Emma's expression shift subtly. "Well, if she does not, I do. What grade are you in, Henry?"

"I'm in fifth grade." He soaked in her attention and smiled shyly. "I'm a year ahead."

"Ma, I thought we talked about how-" Emma flushed and cut herself off. She let out a shaky breath of air and turned to Henry. "So what are you learning about?"

While Henry blathered on about sea life and fractions, Regina kept her eyes trained on Emma's face. There was more to the story, she

thought, than she had been told. There was an undercurrent of tension in this family that nobody seemed willing to talk about. The only one unaffected, it seemed, was Henry. Emma caught her gaze after a moment and smiled, but she recognized the hollow gesture for what it was – an apology, though for what, Regina wasn't sure.

"Will you look at my science fair project when we get home?" Emma opened her mouth to respond, but Henry hurried onward. "I was talking to Regina. You already seen the pictures, Emma. You know what it is. She doesn't! She's like the perfect outside perspective."

"I would love to see it," Regina answered, "as long as Emma can see it, too."

He rolled his eyes. "It's not exactly top secret."

As the van swerved into a different lane, Emma leaned over. "Thanks, but you don't have to include me. This is my family, remember? I'm the one who should be including you."

"It appears to me that you're more of an outsider than I am."

Emma flushed. "I just… It feels like I don't know them. I spent my whole childhood thinking one thing about my parents – and now it's just totally different."

Regina's hand slid along the seat and settled on Emma's knee. "Hence why I'm here? As a buffer?"

"Exactly." Emma's gaze dropped to the hand on her knee. It was comfortably warm, she noted, and she had no desire to make it move. "Sorry about the kid. He's…"

"A child." Regina glanced back at him. "I don't have much experience with children, but he's not bothering me."

"Really?"

"Not at all."

"I meant the whole no experience with children thing."

"I've been busy." Regina folded her arms over her chest, and Emma immediately mourned the loss of Regina's hand on her thigh. "I have a half-sister, but she doesn't have children. I simply haven't been around them and have never sought to be around them."

"You never mentioned you had a sister."

"You were more interested in proving I had no friends than learning about my familial structure."

Emma chuckled. "Well, I mean, when you put it that way, I sound like a real dick."

"Emma." Mary-Margaret twisted her head to glare at her daughter. "Language. Do you want Henry to grow up with a foul mouth like that?"

"Kid knows better." Emma shrugged. "Henry, don't say dick, okay? Also off limits – fuck, shit, damn, hell-"

"Emma," Mary-Margaret snapped. "This was not an invitation to-"

"To what? Ruin Henry's vocabulary?"

"You're not raising him. You have no right to-"

"No right? I have-"

"Ladies," David interrupted. "While this argument was bound to happen, I don't think right now and right here is appropriate."

Mary-Margaret's mouth clacked shut, and her attention returned to the road. Though she had much more to say, Emma silenced immediately and sat stewing with her thoughts whirling around her mind faster than the van was racing down the highway. The tumult in her head stilled only when Regina's hand resumed its gentle grasp on her thigh. She lifted her eyes and met Regina's gaze.

"When is the funeral tomorrow?"

Grateful for the change in subject, even though it was morose, David responded, "Ah, it starts at eleven thirty."

"Very well."

"Then we're heading to the cemetery. You're welcome to wait at our house for that."

Mary-Margaret sniffled, cutting off the rest of what David was going to say. He dug into his pocket and fished out a tissue that looked as though it had seen better days. Regina wondered if she too would feel this depth of emotion if her mother died. Hardly likely, she assured herself.

#

"Nice house," Regina commented, though Emma wasn't sure if the compliment was glib. Knowing Regina's background suggested to Emma that Regina was merely being polite, but Emma certainly appreciated the efforts. After such a long ride with her mother, she was willing to accept any and all measures used to keep the peace.

"Thank you," Mary-Margaret replied, her tone even. Her keys jangled as her hands twitched anxiously. "Henry, go clean up for dinner."

"I'm not even dirty."

"Emma, show Regina where she's staying."

Emma grabbed her pack and then slung Regina's over her shoulder. She guided the other woman through the house to the basement bedroom. There were family portraits and candid shots everywhere, Regina noticed, and Emma's expression was almost always beaming – but the pictures cut off abruptly when Emma was in high school. Emma pushed the door to the room open, dumped the bags, and spread her arms.

"Welcome to my room."

Regina entered slowly and took a long look around the sparsely decorated room. To be honest, it looked much more like a guest room than Emma's room, Regina thought. She picked up a small porcelain figurine and cocked an eyebrow.

"Okay, so this is my room when I'm home. Henry got the room I used to have."

"That does explain the lack of personal touches in here."

"What were you expecting?" Emma relished in the quiet moment she was receiving with Regina. She knew that the moment she went back upstairs, Mary-Margaret would want to have a talk with her – and she really didn't want to sit through another motherly rant.

Regina eyed Emma. "Perhaps a few band posters. My first thought was boy bands, but that seems too typical. My official guess is some sort of grungy rock bands."

"I don't know if I'm offended or pleased that you can read me like that." Emma smirked. "You know some intimate details about me, y'know that?"

"Intimate?" Regina let her voice drop into a sultry purr. "My dear, this is hardly intimate. However, if you would like further instruction as to what is, I would be happy to instruct you."

Emma felt each syllable as it fell from Regina's lips as a tremor of her heart. She licked her lips. "Seriously, you're going to kill me. I'm trying to be decent, Regina. Honorable."

"The thing about business, Ms. Swan, is that while some may hide behind their ethics and tout their purity as badges of honor, the truly successful person knows when to play dirty." Regina stepped forward and placed a finger on the tip of Emma's nose. It traveled slowly across Emma's lips, down Emma's chin, and came to rest on Emma's clavicle. "Do you know how to play dirty?"

Emma reached up and caught the meandering hand. She pressed the knuckles to her lips. "Damn, I knew bringing you would be a great idea."

"Emma, we need to talk!" Mary-Margaret's voice echoed down the stairwell. "Let your friend settle in."

"Ah," Emma groaned. She didn't release her grip until Regina tugged free and walked to the bed.

"Now, now. Ms. Swan. Go talk to your mother. I'm sure I'll still be here when you're done."

"You're killing me," Emma repeated. "By the end of this weekend, I will be dead, and you'll have to stick around for a second funeral."

Regina waved Emma away and set about opening her suitcase. She wanted first and foremost to change her clothing. Travel clothes, while somewhat nice looking, were for comfort, not style. Regina wanted to wear something to dinner that would intimidate her host and allure her – she hesitated a moment before finishing her thought - friend. She had no clue what the older woman and Emma were going to talk about, but she was sure Emma wouldn't be happy about it. Unsure as to why exactly she wanted Emma to be pleased, she donned a neatly ironed pair of slacks, a slim-fitting white blouse, and a sleek black vest. She left the blouse unbuttoned at the top so that the top of her bosom was visible to the staring eye and headed upstairs.

"I'm serious, Emma. You can't just bring anyone you want into this house without telling us first." Mary-Margaret squared her shoulders. She stared Emma down; try as she may, she couldn't keep her frustration from leaking into her tone.

Emma narrowed her eyes and let her eyebrows bunch together. "I thought this was my home. Can't I bring whoever I want into my home?"

"Don't throw my words back at me, Emma. Of course this is your home, but you can't be disrespectful to those within it. You came home for a funeral, not a party. I'm disappointed that this behavior hasn't changed."

Emma folded her arms over her chest. "There's nothing wrong with my behavior. This is exactly who you raised me to be, free spirit and all. You used to find this cute. You encouraged me every step of the way. If you dislike who I am, blame yourself because you made me this way."

"I've grown up, Emma, and I'm sorry I'm expecting the same of you." Mary-Margaret moved closer and set a hand on Emma's shoulder.

"Emma, I had you when I was sixteen years old. I didn't know what I was doing, but I do now. I know you think it's too late to salvage a good relationship between us, but can't we make due with one that just works?"

Emma jerked away. "You're making all sorts of decisions about Henry's life-"

"Because I'm his parent."

"That's-"

"That's the decision you made ten years ago. All I'm asking you now is that you let it be."

"That's the decision you made for me." Emma bristled and walked away, her shoulders near her ears and her fists clenched against her sides. She barged straight into Regina, which almost knocked the frown from her face. Still, the conversation with her mother lingered, weighing on her chest. "Did you hear any of that?"

"No," Regina lied. "Not a word."

As they headed toward the kitchen, Regina wondered if Henry knew the truth – that his big sister was actually his mother. It would certainly make most family events awkward. More than that, Regina wondered how Emma felt about the whole thing. She had mistakenly thought that Emma was incapable of subtlety, of masking her emotion, but now she had a greater understanding. Emma was entirely capable, perhaps even more so than she was because Emma could disguise what she was feeling as something else. Regina could only tamp her anger down into silence or scathing remarks.

"So, if you're hungry at any time," Emma cut into her thoughts, "this is the pantry. My mom keeps it pretty full all the time. Says Henry's a growing boy, and all that."

"I do not snack between meals."

"Well, I do." Emma grabbed a pack of fruit snacks, tore it open, and tossed a few shapes into her mouth. "But treat this like your home."

"This? My home?" Regina snorted. "This is perhaps-"

"That wasn't an invitation to criticize the house." Emma laughed. "You'll have plenty of opportunity for that later."

Recognizing that there was still a tendril of tension in Emma's words and tone, Regina reached out and grabbed Emma's wrist. "I find that the best way to win an argument is stay calm."

"What? What are you talking about? We're not arguing…"

"The moment you visibly lose your temper is the moment you've lost. As Mother says, remain in control, or someone else will."

"I haven't lost control."

"I'm merely saying-"

"You did hear something, didn't you?"

"You were practically shouting. I'd have to be deaf not to hear something."

"You lied."

"So did you." Regina stepped closer until they were nose to nose. "You told me Henry was your brother."

"I didn't. I just said the kid was born. I didn't say whose kid he was."

"So it was a lie by omission," Regina hissed. "I said he was your brother and you didn't correct me."

"What was I supposed to say? Hey person I just met," Emma's voice dropped to barely audible, "the kid I'm talking about thinks he's my brother, but he's actually my son. Come home and meet my fucking circus of a family."

"A little forewarning would have been nice."

Emma fought to keep her voice low. "Would that have changed your mind? Would knowing this little factoid have kept you from coming

with me?"

"I don't know." Regina released her grip and frowned. "What's changing my mind most is your current behavior."

"My behavior?" Emma's body tensed, bringing the image of a fully baited mousetrap, taut and ready to spring, to Regina's mind. She had perhaps used the wrong language, she thought, especially given the conversation she wasn't supposed to have heard. "You got a problem with my behavior?"

"Ms. Swan, I agreed to accompany you home, but that decision was predicated upon your calm demeanor. This – whatever you wish to call it if 'behavior' is distasteful – is making me wonder just what I've gotten myself into. I'm afraid this was a terrible mistake."

Emma deflated. "I'm sorry. Look, my mom just has a way of-"

"Getting under your skin." Regina felt like she had somehow disarmed a bomb. She glanced toward the kitchen. "For the sake of my relaxing weekend, could we pretend that this didn't happen?"

"Done. We'll talk about it later?"

"Yes."

Just like that, Regina thought, there was a later for them. She hadn't yet considered what would happen when the weekend was over – but she found that she had no qualms with the idea. Indeed, the idea of some sort of future that included the blonde woman was almost enticing.

Emma took her usual seat near the head of the table and gestured for Regina to take the seat next to her. Over the next few minutes, the rest of the family filtered in. David sat to Emma's left, Henry directly across, and Mary-Margaret to Henry's right. The food on the table was lukewarm, but, as Mary-Margaret explained, it would have been hot if the flight had been on time. The words were innocent enough, but seemed to Regina to be particularly aimed at Emma.

"Next time we'll have to pray to the weather gods, huh?"

"Like Thor! Dad took me to see that last weekend," Henry enthused. "I bet he coulda got you here on time."

"I thought the plane was having technical difficulties." Mary-Margaret dumped a scoop of mashed potatoes onto her plate. "What does the weather have to do with anything?"

"It's called a joke," Regina stated blandly.

"I know," Mary-Margaret responded, her tone wary and hurt.

"Please excuse me, then. I assumed from your reaction that you had no sense of humor."

Emma smirked into her skirt steak. She forced her lips around her fork to hide her expression. Finally, she thought, someone willing to harass her mother. Everyone from the area had too much respect for Mary-Margaret. The last name Blanchard carried a certain degree of respect and even though she had changed her name, Mary-Margaret still enjoyed the status earned by her family. It had driven Emma crazy when she was younger to see so many people defer to her mother. Mary-Margaret hadn't even done anything, she wanted to say, which meant Mary-Margaret shouldn't benefit from Grandpa Leo's hard work.

In the interest of keeping things pleasant, she nudged her knee against Regina's. "Dad's got the best jokes. Don't you, Dad?"

"Oh, no." Henry shook his head. "Please, Dad, don't start."

David looked directly at Henry. "What do you call it when a dog eats a rare gem?"

"Dad," Henry whined. "You're embarrassing me."

"On purpose, too." David glanced at Regina. "Do you know what it's called?"

"Not the slightest idea."

"A diamond in the ruff."

Mary-Margaret laughed loudly, but the rest of the table was nearly silent. She smiled lovingly at David before resuming her meal. Emma exchanged a look with Regina, who still sported a small, haughty smirk. Henry flicked balled up piece of napkin at David, which the older man batted away with the ease of years of practice.

Emma snorted. "Your jokes are getting worse every day, Pops."

He shrugged. "Maybe I'm not wasting my good ones on those who don't appreciate them."

"It was very funny, dear."

"Truly the height of comedic gold," Regina said, her voice ever even. "Tell me, David, have you ever thought of pursuing stand up?"

"Oh yes." He grinned and shook his head. "I work down at the local police department. Makes Maggie here worry, but there's not a whole lot of crime around here. Which gives me plenty of time to sit at my desk and write my jokes."

"Emma mentioned your family is in business?"

"Not mine." David lifted his hands. "I'm the son of a humble fisherman. It's Maggie's family Emma was talking about."

"My family's company is fairly well known on this coast."

Regina's expression didn't falter. "I suppose all businesses must start somewhere. In a few decades I'm sure you'll be worldwide, so you have nothing to be ashamed of."

"I'm not-" Mary-Margaret stuttered a moment, her eyes narrowing. "We're currently negotiating a deal which will expand our holdings tenfold."

"Mags, maybe leave the business talk for some time that's not dinnertime. Emma, where's the last place you've gone?"

"I was out in New Mexico a few days ago."

"That's where Breaking Bad is set." Henry bounced up in his seat.

"You're letting him watch that?" Emma glared at Mary-Margaret, who pointedly looked away.

While Emma sat and glowered at Mary-Margaret, Regina slid a hand under the table and set it on Emma's knee. Emma glanced at her momentarily, but refocused as excuses slipped out of her mother's mouth. Frustration was radiating off the blonde in waves, so Regina let her fingers tip-toe up Emma's thigh. She stopped an inch or two from the apex of Emma's legs and squeezed. She could see Emma's throat working hard to swallow, which meant her plan to divert Emma's energies was working properly.

"I may not be a parent," Regina said, easing closer and closer to Emma's groin, "but even I know that you need to keep a close eye on what your child is watching. He's your responsibility, so you cannot simply claim that you didn't notice. It's your job to notice. You can't let the television be a babysitter. You need to engage him."

"I know how to raise children!"

As soon as Regina's hand cupped her crotch, Emma leapt to her feet. She was fairly certain she was beet-red, but she could no longer sit still while the other woman teased her. "I'm full. Thanks, Dad. Need help with the dishes?"

"No, that's fine. Why don't you take Regina down to the park?"

"She doesn't want to see the dumb park."

"I would love to. Emma, you promised me an exciting weekend. So come along, my dear, and excite me."

Regina picked her plate up, only to have it snatched from her fingers by a frowning Mary-Margaret. She shrugged; manners dictated that she at least cart her plate to the sink, but she wouldn't complain if the other woman did the work for her. Regina rarely said no to others volunteering to do work she'd otherwise have to do herself.

"Can I come?"

"Kid, go do your homework." Emma gave him a loving noogie as she walked by. "We'll do the park another day."

#

Emma stared up at the night sky and rubbed the web between her thumb and forefinger of her left hand. There was a good deal on her mind, not the least of which was Regina's very forward affection. It was flattering, and oh so alluring, but she wasn't really sure what was spurring it. As soon as they were out of the house, Regina had looped their arms together, and they'd remained linked until they reached the park.

"Dare I ask what you're thinking?"

"Can I ask you a question?"

"It seems unavoidable. If I say no, you'll simply ask it anyway." Regina smirked to show that she was saying this in good humor.

"Why?"

"Because that just seems to be the type of person you are."

"I mean, why are you…" Emma trailed off, unsure of how exactly to phrase her question. "Why are you, uh, showing me physical affection? At the airport, you were so adamant I keep my hands to myself."

"At the airport, you were a stranger inviting me to a strange place. You very well could have been an ax murderer."

"I still could be one."

"Yes, but you've missed several opportunities to act upon your murderous impulses." Regina spotted a park bench and headed for it, not paying any attention to if Emma was following her. "During the hours we spent in close quarters, I suppose I found you to be less potentially threatening."

"Which means you find me less dangerous and more touchable?"

"If it bothers you-"

"I never said it bothered me." Emma sat on the bench and ran a

hand through her hair. "You do realize that you're incredibly attractive, right? And I'm pretty damn sure you know what's been on my mind since we met. It's just that things like this don't really happen to me. I don't accidentally run into the hottest woman I've ever met, and she doesn't somehow change her mind about me over the course of a few hours."

"My opinion hasn't changed. The difference now is that I have a modicum of trust in you."

"Even though I lied to you?"

"Yes, in spite of your dishonesty," Regina stated, rolling her eyes. "There are many reasons for hiding facts about one's family. I decided that, given the circumstances, I can understand the secrecy. You didn't trust me before. Do you trust me now?"

"I guess I have to." Emma slid an arm around Regina's shoulder. "After all, if you can't trust the woman who's touched your hoo-ha, who can you trust?"

"You have such low standards."

"Nah, I'm just making an exception for you."

"I did have some questions."

"I thought you might."

Regina rested her head against Emma. "Why is your mother raising your son?"

"It's a long story."

"The evening is young."

"So was I." Emma closed her eyes. "I was fifteen when I met Neal. I was in the middle of that horrible rebellious phase. Made worse, I might add, because it felt like absolutely nothing would faze my mother, who was intent on being cool and with it. So I tried to hotwire a car and take a joyride. The only problem was that the car had already been stolen. Neal was in his twenties – but in the same

spot as I was. We connected over our mutual dislike of our parents. Before long, we were spending all of our time together. One thing led to another, and we were dating.

"Of course I hid him from Mom. I wanted something in my life that she couldn't touch or taint. What I had with him – I thought it was special. I thought he was like The One. You know, like in the movies? But… the condom broke. I was pregnant, and I couldn't hide it from my parents. Mom found out and gave us an ultimatum – either he left and never came back, or she'd call the police. I got pregnant at seventeen, but we'd been having sex since like two weeks after we met. He'd get hit with statutory rape."

"I'm guessing he left."

"Yeah. Some true love, huh?" Emma shrugged. "I hated Mom so much for that."

"So how did she end up with Henry?"

Emma tilted her head back so she could stare up at the stars. "My being pregnant really rattled her. No matter what I had done before, she could cover it up no problem. But this? No way. I had finally found something that she couldn't be cool with. She told everyone I was studying abroad, but really she sent me to spend the pregnancy with her great aunt. Gran was nice enough, but I spent every day of those remaining months hating. I hated Mom. I hated Neal. I hated myself.

"And then he was born. There was no way I could raise him like that. I'm not proud, but I ran. I left him with my mother, and I ran as far away as I could. I had a friend out in Colorado who was willing to take me in. He watched out for me and helped me figure out who I am. By the time I had my life together, it was too late to come storming back into Henry's life. Mom told me that it would do him irreparable damage if I told him the truth. I'm like a fucking hurricane in my own life – I can't do that to his."

"Will you ever tell him?"

"I want to. I want to every single time I see him. But what am I

expecting? That he'll be happy?" Emma dragged her wrist over her eyes. "Nobody would want me as his mom."

"I take it that you don't want more children."

"How could I?" Emma laughed brokenly. "I couldn't take care of one. Why would I spawn another?"

"You were the one," Regina murmured, "who told me just hours ago that people change."

"And I really want that to be true. You have no idea."

"You brought me here to convince me of something you don't even believe yourself?"

"I believe other people can change – I've seen it, y'know? And if people can become worse, then they can definitely become better, right?" Emma pushed down the upset feelings that thinking about Henry's conception brought up. "I guess I'm trying to prove it to both of us."

Regina lifted off Emma to get a better look into the blonde's eyes. "You'll need to work a bit harder, my dear."

"I'm working as hard as I can."

"You know what I've never done?" Regina's fingers trailed along Emma's chin and then entangled themselves in Emma's shirt. They knocked Emma off balance as much as the non sequitur did. She struggled to keep up with Regina's rapid conversational pace. "I've never been reckless. I've spent my life doing as my mother pleased, but you've given me a weekend to do whatever it is I desire, consequences be damned."

"Are you feeling reckless?"

"Mother has promised that this business deal will change my life forever. I don't know what she means, but – but I'm afraid that it may well mean the end of what little remains of my freedom." Regina licked her lips. "These few days are all I have left."

"What do you want to do with them?"

Regina leaned up, their noses brushing. She could feel the soft puff of Emma's breath against her lips. "I'd like to kiss you."

"All day, every day?" Emma hated that her knee-jerk reaction was humor. "Because-"

"Hush," Regina commanded. When Emma's words babbled onward, she made Emma quiet the only way she could think of. She pressed their lips together. Abruptly, Emma ceased chattering. The blonde practically dragged Regina into her lap, fingers pressed into Regina's hips and eyes welded shut.

Regina settled in on top of the other woman. She cupped Emma's cheeks and ran her tongue along Emma's lips. When Emma's mouth opened, she entered with gusto. She hadn't wanted this for long, but the moment certainly felt like she had waited months for just this. Emma held her tightly, and Regina felt like nothing else in the world mattered.

A car zoomed past, though, shattering her serene peace. She jerked back, suddenly aware once again of where they were. Going back to the house didn't seem to be an option, though, as she didn't want to run into Mrs. Swan – and she was fairly certain Emma didn't want to either. Her gaze drifted beyond Emma's head as Emma panted beneath her.

"What?" Emma sounded breathless, just as Regina felt.

"Not here." Regina clambered off Emma as elegantly as she could. She tugged Emma to her feet and led the blonde deeper into the park. Departing from the path, she chose a small grassy area blocked from view by several bushes and a few towering trees. Emma didn't seem to mind being pushed haphazardly down, and she didn't complain in the slightest when Regina kissed her again.

"I've never done something like this," Emma whispered, her heart racing. "What are we even doing?"

Regina yanked on Emma's shirt, forcing Emma to sit up at an

awkward angle so she could toss it aside. "I have no idea."

Emma fumbled with the buttons on Regina's vest, and then blouse. The woman just had to dress so exquisitely, Emma silently bemoaned. It was so attractive on the woman but such a hassle to remove. She was careful, though, not to ruin any garment because she could just imagine the fit Regina would throw if something were to go wrong. One rip could end whatever it was that was happening between them.

Regina's hand burrowed down into her jeans, and one lithe finger pressed against her clit. Emma's head pressed back into the grass, and her mouth opened into a tiny moue of silent pleasure. As she massaged Emma's clit in gentle circles, Regina bit down on Emma's throat, sucking just hard enough to evoke moans from the twitching woman under her, but not so much so that the marks she left would last more than the evening.

She moved lower and grasped the flimsy material of Emma's bra between her teeth. With a minute yank, she had Emma's quiet moans escalating into breathy groans. Though rubbing against Emma's jeans was causing a raw patch on her wrist, Regina dug down and pushed a single finger inside. Emma's hips thrust off the ground.

"Fuck, Regina," she gritted out. Summoning her strength, she pushed up and rolled. Regina toppled sideways. Emma undid the brunette's slacks and tugged them down to Regina's knees. It wasn't ideal, but it provided her ample access. She nestled between Regina's thighs, bracing her hip against Regina's groin. "Are you sure you want this?"

"Positive." Regina tangled her fingers in Emma's hair and pulled Emma closer. "You?"

"I did promise to keep my hands to myself…"

"Then use your mouth," Regina commanded. She stole one kiss before pushing Emma's head down the length of her body. Emma smirked and placed several kisses to Regina's inner thighs. She nipped at the supple flesh and then blew a puff of warm air against

Regina's cunt. Regina hummed her appreciation. "I will not beg, Ms. Swan."

"You're not fucking my mom, Regina." Emma's tongue darted out.

"Emma." The word came out a strangled grunt of a noise, but Regina was proud to manage it. She curled her fingers into the grass as Emma set to work.

Emma snaked a hand up Regina's body, pinched a nipple, and gently twisted. Regina squirmed under her – the brunette was quiet, but Emma was determined to get a scream out of the other woman. Regina, while cognizant of their public location, was having a difficult time remaining silent. She shoved a hand into her mouth as Emma's tongue flicked against her.

How, she wondered, had she ended up here? Logically, she could put together the pieces, but on a broader scale, she just wasn't sure. She had everything in her life so well planned and directed – but here she was have impromptu sex in a park. It was the single wildest thing she'd ever done. It was like having an out of body experience, and she knew she would probably regret her conduct later. Now, though… Now she bit down on her hand, squeezed her eyes shut, and let Emma ravage her.

She was nearing her peak when Emma slipped a single finger into her. She could hear Emma's chuckle, and the short apology for breaking her promise, but she couldn't focus on anything but how good it felt to have Emma inside her. A short whimper escaped her lips as her hand slammed back into the grass and scrambled for something – anything to hold onto.

Sensing that she was onto something, Emma pumped her finger steadily and, when she deemed it safe enough, added a second. Regina's hips jerked off the ground, and Emma got what she was after. It was strangled and quiet, but it was a scream. Emma backed off slowly, enjoying the tremors that were racking Regina's body. She wiped her fingers on the grass and sidled back up so they were face to face. Regina let go of the grass and pulled Emma in for a kiss.

When Regina's fingers made tentative contact with her clit, Emma nearly collapsed, her arms unwilling to continue to support her. She bit down on Regina's collarbone and practically purred. Regina rubbed slowly and allowed Emma to shift her hips, desperate for heavier contact. While Regina would not beg, she had no problem making Emma do so. Every time Emma tried to increase the skin-to-skin ratio, Regina drew back.

"Regina," Emma ground out. "Would you please fucking get on with it?"

"Oh?" Regina smirked, her fingers tantalizingly close to Emma's hot skin. "Did you need something?"

"You damn well know I need something."

"I hadn't the slightest idea."

"You're so going to get it for this." Emma found the strength within herself to pinch Regina's side. "I'm going to make you pay for every second-"

"And how are you going to do that?"

"I'm going to tie you down." Emma thrust her hips down in a futile attempt to get Regina's touch more fully. "I'm going to touch you so softly. I'm going to get you so close to coming for me."

"This doesn't sound like any form of retribution I've ever heard of."

"And then I'm going to leave you there."

Regina closed her eyes and let the pleased shivers run their course through her body. "Have I been bad, Emma?"

"Incredibly ba-"

Emma squeaked as Regina's hand cupped her groin. She flushed, embarrassed by the silliness of the noise, but Regina paid no mind. This was fun, Regina thought, which was… different. She'd had sex before, but her male partners usually just rutted into her until they came. Her mother usually set up her male dates, so she wasn't

entirely surprised by the sort of man Cora chose. Her female partners, however, were entirely her own decision, but not one of them had made sex this fun.

A dog barked nearby, dragging both women back to reality. Emma grabbed Regina's wrist, cheeks stained a bright red. "Uh, maybe we could continue this somewhere else? Like my bed is a good start."

Half afraid the magic of the moment had been broken, Regina stood awkwardly and redressed. Within a minute it didn't look as though she'd had a tumble in the grass whatsoever. Emma, on the other hand, had messy hair that just wouldn't go flat. This woman, Regina thought, was so imperfect and yet so perfect. Too bad, she mused, that Emma hadn't made more of herself. Cora might have approved of the choice if that were the case. As it stood, however, Regina's life was going to change, and she couldn't change it.

This evening, though, was all hers. She linked her fingers with Emma's as they walked back to the house. Emma clutched her hand tightly, lost in thought as they walked. Despite her flaws, Regina was there. It was fairly amazing, she mused. Most of her previous romantic entanglements, if she dared call Regina that, were very short lived. They either found out about her odd familial situation and left, or she pushed them away when they got too close. So far, perhaps because of how brief they both knew this was doomed to be, she felt comfortable just enjoying what little time they had together.

"I'm sorry I broke my promise."

"I believe there is a loophole for granted permission."

"Ah." Emma lifted their joined hands and kissed the back of Regina's. "I hope you don't revoke it."

Regina watched the way Emma's eyes glittered in the light of the street lamps. It was really just too bad that she found someone who could make her feel like herself – and there was nothing she could do about it.

Chapter 4

Regina woke before Emma, not because she was particularly awake but because her phone buzzed under her pillow. She wasn't sure how it ended up there, but she pulled it out quickly and answered it to keep from waking the very naked woman sleeping next to her. As she greeted her mother, she dressed quickly in a pair of silken pajamas and hurried into the hallway.

"Do you have any idea what you've done?"

Regina wandered the silent halls of the Swan house, found the living room, and took a seat on the loveseat by the front window. She set her forehead against the cool glass pane and sighed. "What did I do, Mother?"

"You missed your meeting."

"So sue the transit authority." Regina found it remarkably easy to remain calm, given the exhausting night she'd had. She wasn't sure how they'd remained so quiet, or even what time they'd finally fallen asleep, but Emma had worn her out. In this state, she felt like she could handle anything her mother might throw at her. "I can't control that my flight was delayed."

"You've put me in a bad position," Cora snapped. "I thought you grew out of this foolishness, Regina. Your actions have consequences and-"

"I am aware, Mother," Regina interrupted, "but I am not at fault this time."

"I don't like your tone."

"There's nothing I can do now."

"I've set another meeting up for later today. We're very lucky you're mistake didn't cost us this contract."

"I can't do that."

"What do you mean?"

"Just what I've said." Regina closed her eyes, her calm beginning to waver. There was just something about Cora that unsettled her. Just once she wanted Cora to recognize that she had unique desires and needs apart from what Cora deemed best for the company. "I can't do that this weekend."

"Would you care to explain to me why?" Cora's voice tightened, and Regina visualized a mouse trap ready to spring shut and snap her neck.

"I'm taking the weekend for myself, Mother."

"You take too much and give nothing back."

Regina's expression faltered momentarily before tensing. Her brows furrowed together, and the same old anger she always felt bubbled back to the surface. "I've given my life to this company, Mother, and now I want two damn days-"

"Fine."

"-to just-" Regina paused. "Fine?"

"I was clearly incorrect in my assumption of your priorities, Regina. So fine. Take the weekend to act frivolously. However, when you return, there will be no job waiting for you."

"That's not fair."

"Fair?" Cora snorted. "The world is not fair, darling. The world benefits those who deserve it, and you simply do not."

"Mother… I've spent my life trying to do what was best for you and the company."

"So you keep repeating. The fact remains that there is very little to show for your… efforts." Regina could practically feel her mother's sneer as the last word trickled like poison through the phone. "Either do this meeting or do not come home."

"I've contributed plenty."

"You prefer chatting with your useless lug of a father."

"It was Father's business to begin with," Regina argued. "Of course I talk to him."

"Talking to him does not increase our reach."

Regina frowned. "And what good will this business deal bring us? We don't need the silly little markets carrying our products."

"A fool limits herself, Regina. Our company has always catered to a higher class of people, and we always will, but there remains an untapped portion of the population who can and will give us their money. Our best chance of creating this opportunity has been wasted because you have to have your little-"

"When is the meeting?"

#

Emma woke slowly, feeling a bit groggy and out of sorts. She rubbed her eyes and tried to figure just what was missing from her room. Her gaze landed upon Regina's luggage. Ah, she thought. Regina was missing. She couldn't have gotten far, though, so Emma shimmied awkwardly into a pair of shorts and a tank top and headed out into the house. The tantalizing scent of coffee lured her into the kitchen, where she found the brunette brooding at the table.

"You're up early."

"I am."

Emma reached up into the cabinets, rooting around for something, until she noticed the mug from which Regina was drinking. It was black, with gracefully arching swans interlocking around it, and it was very much so Emma's favorite. "Uh-"

"Allow me to guess," Regina stated dryly. "I'm in your seat? No. I'm using your cup?"

"It's not mine, really." Emma flushed. "And really, after last night – what's mine is yours and stuff."

Regina rolled her eyes. "I thought I was quite clear about last night."

There was something different about Regina this morning. Emma grabbed a different, less special, mug and poured a hearty helping of steaming black liquid in, and then drank it straight. It was much stronger than she expected, as Mary-Margaret usually made a watery concoction that barely tasted like anything, but she sipped it down as if the strong, bitter taste was completely what she wanted. Her ability to process increased as the caffeine hit her system.

"Uh, what were you clear about?"

"While we shared an interesting night together, this cannot go on any longer."

"Are you saying…" Emma cleared her throat. "That we – that I'm-"

"A mistake?" Regina gripped her mug more tightly. "In the long run, I'm afraid the answer is yes."

Emma's lips twitched lower. This version of Regina was a vast departure from the woman who kissed her so pleasantly just hours before. Something, she deduced, must have happened.

Aware that the other woman was in a rather hostile mood, Emma took her coffee to the table, sat down, and tried to think of how best to broach the topic. She met Regina's eyes and searched the brunette's wavering gaze. The very fact that Regina couldn't maintain eye contact with her made her think that there was something troublesome knocking around between Regina's ears.

"Well, for what it's worth, I can't imagine that anyone would think a night with you was a mistake." Emma grinned, doing her best to sound to chipper and not at all hurt by Regina's words. "Actually, it's probably going into my memory banks as number two in my best hits album."

Despite her grouchy mood, Regina's eyebrow cocked up. "And what, pray tell, is number one?"

Emma leaned in closer and whispered, "It's a secret."

"Tell me."

"How do I know you won't squeal on me?"

Regina rolled her eyes. "You presume your secret is juicy enough to spill."

Emma settled back in her chair. "Maybe I just like building the mood."

"What mood is that?" Regina fought her lips down. They were nearly curling up into a smile, she scolded herself, and she couldn't let Emma know that she was almost in a good mood once again.

"The mood where you're not looking like the saddest puppy in the world."

"Did you just call me a dog?"

"A puppy," Emma corrected. She sipped her coffee and examined Regina's face. "If you were a dog, I'd say you would probably be a pit bull – you've got a mean reputation, but if handled correctly-"

"I'm not a dog."

"Do you know what sort of dog I'd be?"

This was inane, Regina thought. Despite this, she couldn't help but cock her head to the side and ask, "What sort?"

"I'm a pit bull, too. I wasn't handled right most of my life, though, so sometimes I lash out. Sometimes I feel like I need a muzzle, or I might really hurt someone." Emma stared at her. "So I get it when someone does something that hurts me."

"Don't pretend to understand."

"What changed between when we fell asleep this morning and now?"

This woman was so presumptuous, Regina thought. She sat silently, fuming and thinking about how much it irritated her that Emma decided it was okay to ask such questions so bluntly. Emma wasn't her bosom buddy – or her confidant – or her therapist – so really, Emma had no right to query about her affairs like that. She wouldn't tell anyone what was troubling her, let alone the woman who-

Regina frowned. Emma had very much so interrupted her life. The blonde had, in a way, swept her off her feet, but not in a sweet romantic sense – rather Emma had yanked the rug out from under her feet, and then caught her. The rescue, Regina thought, didn't erase the fact that Emma had caused the fall in the first place. Things were all so jumbled in her head now; what she thought to be important before just didn't feel urgent anymore. And what seemed pointless just days ago was suddenly her first priority. She had no idea what she was supposed to be doing, and it was all Emma's fault.

Averting her gaze down to her coffee, Regina watched the small billows of steam rise up and dissipate. She didn't owe Emma an answer, she told herself. As far as she was concerned, Emma had broken her promise, which meant that Regina could leave at any moment without so much as a doubt or guilty feeling. But Emma was watching her with such damn caring eyes. Regina wanted to both rage at the other woman and speak honestly. The duality of her desire did nothing for the confusion sitting heavy in her chest.

It had been years since someone had looked at her like that – like what she had to say actually mattered. She lifted the mug to her lips and drank slowly, hating the way her hand trembled. That was really the issue, she determined. The last person she trusted had disappeared from her life, leaving nothing behind but a two sentence letter. He'd taken her heart with him, too. Regina brought her gaze back to Emma and wondered: what made this woman any different?

"Look, if it's that big of a deal, you don't have to answer me right now," Emma relented. "Just know that I do really care, okay? It's not some act, or like a stupid ploy or whatever-"

"I don't see the point in telling you because in two days you will once again be nothing to me."

"Implying that right now I'm something to you."

Regina glared at Emma, hoping that the power of her gaze would be sufficient to make Emma's head explode. "I said no such thing."

"Right." Emma waited a moment, wondering if Regina was going to say more. "Look, the first thing on my top ten is the kid."

"Do you wish that things were different?"

Understanding that this was a ploy to change the subject, Emma could have fought the shift but instead shrugged. "Yeah. A little? I wish he knew."

"Knew what?" Henry yawned as he entered the kitchen. He shuffled past them, yanked the pantry open, and rooted around. Eventually he found his Frosted Mallow Pops and set off for the bowls.

Emma's face blanched, so Regina stepped in with a smooth lie. "We were talking about your grandfather."

"Yeah. I wish I got to say good bye, so he knew I loved him."

Had he been more awake, Henry may have noticed the strained manner in which Emma answered. As tired as he was, though, all he could think about was getting the cereal into his mouth without spilling. He collapsed into his seat and began shoveling.

"Those have no nutritional value."

"They're good."

"Breakfast is the most important meal of the day. You should be eating something that will give you sufficient energy until lunch."

He lifted his head. "Do you make good eggs?"

Regina smirked and stood. "What kind would you like?"

"Over easy." He watched her carefully, evaluating her every move. "There's also bacon in the fridge…?"

"Very well."

He whipped his head toward Emma. "She's definitely winning."

"I didn't realize this was a competition," Emma retorted. She felt a slight sting at his words, though she knew there was no malice behind them. She was so tired of being replaced – first by her mother and now by her new friend. She wasn't a good enough mother, and apparently she wasn't a good enough sister. "Can't we both be tied? Co-cool people?"

"You don't get it, Emma. Being number one means that there has to be a number two."

"You're a number two."

He stuck his tongue out at her. "If you want to be my sister, you should be nicer to me."

"Henry." Regina held an egg in one hand, a frying pan in the other. "If you want your breakfast, you should tell Emma how very much you value her."

He frowned. "And suddenly there's a tie for third place."

"There are only two of us." Emma cocked her head. "Explain how we're both in third place?"

"I've decided that I'm also in the running."

"For being your own sister?" Emma laughed, though she didn't think anything about the situation was truly funny.

Regina snorted. "You can't just change the rules to suit yourself."

"Why not?" He grinned. "It's my contest, isn't it?"

"And if you win? How will you be your own sister?"

"Uh…" He scratched his head. "Can I get back to you about that? It's too early for this."

"Agreed." Emma slouched back. Actually, she thought, there was no proper time of day for this. Maybe if Regina hadn't been so keen on pushing her away as well, Henry's slight against her wouldn't have cut so deeply. As it stood, though, it seemed like nobody in the house actually wanted her around on her terms.

"Good morning." Mary-Margaret shuffled into the kitchen, wiping her eyes. She paused when she saw Regina making breakfast and then smiled. "Oh, that's very nice of you to make us all food. I'll have scrambled eggs."

Emma watched a muscle in Regina's jaw tic, but rather than ream Mary-Margaret for presuming that she was making food for everyone, Regina simply nodded. Interesting, Emma thought. She was aware that Regina possessed tact but also knew the brunette had woken up in some sort of bad mood. If only she were able to act like that around her mother, she bemoaned silently. Life in the Swan house would be so much more peaceful whenever she visited. That was her problem, Emma decided. She was just too much her own person and not able whatsoever to be what others wanted her to be, which caused friction.

David followed shortly thereafter. He kissed Mary-Margaret's cheeks before heading for the stove. "I make some mean French toast. You want some, Regina?"

"I would enjoy that."

"Em?"

"I'm fine, thanks."

He stared at her cup of coffee and smirked. "Wow, that's such a healthy meal."

She stuck her tongue out at him and stood. Aware that every set of eyes was upon her, she strolled to the door as if nothing were bothering her and lifted a hand in parting. "I'm going to take a walk. I'll be back in a bit."

"You'll miss family breakfast-"

"I'm not eating breakfast, Mom." Emma stomped down the hall before Mary-Margaret could make her any angrier. She did feel bad leaving Regina to deal with her family, but Regina had left her to deal with these intense emotions all on her own. It was fair, sort of. She wiped at her eyes as she tucked her feet into her shoes in a futile attempt to look completely normal to the outside world.

Regina watched Emma leave and felt a very foreign emotion roiling about in her stomach. She stared down at the egg on the pan. It sizzled but offered her no answers. Was it possible, she wondered, that she felt some form of regret? She nudged the egg with a spatula, getting it cooked just right for Henry even though her mind was clearly elsewhere.

She owed Emma some sort of explanation. That was the crux of it, she decided. She had behaved somewhat poorly, which had an adverse effect on the other woman – so, in a way, she was directly responsible for Emma's negative mood and sudden exit. As she slid the egg onto a plate, she wondered what sort of egg Emma would eat. Henry chirped a thank you at her, but she barely heard.

"You can go after her, you know." David interrupted her thoughts with a softly-spoken comment. "I can make Mary-Margaret's eggs."

"She wants to be alone."

"Did she tell you that? Or are you assuming?"

Regina stared at him blankly. "What's your point?"

"Emma has never been all that clear about anything. I think things get muddy for her. She doesn't know how to ask for what she wants. I guess we didn't really give her the right tools when she was a kid." He shrugged. "I've come to accept that I had no idea how to be the father she needed. Fact is, though, that sometimes she does things because she needs something from someone, but she just has no idea what she needs, or who to ask, or how to ask for it."

"So you think she stormed out of here so that I would follow?"

"I don't think it's direct like that. But I think she needs you."

"You don't know me," Regina stated. "How can you possibly know if I'm good for your daughter?"

"I've got a good feeling about you." He winked. "Now go get her."

#

Emma sat on the park bench and frowned at every person who walked past her. When she was younger, she used to invent small stories about the strangers she saw, but she'd never wanted so badly to be one of those strangers until this moment. A man in a baseball cap and sweats jogged past her – his life was probably much easier than hers. He was some sort of teacher, she decided, who loved his job and was richly rewarded every day when he touched the life of a child in an impactful way. She squeezed her eyes closed and wished to be someone else.

"Emma."

So much for that, she thought. She opened her eyes and watched Regina approach. The other woman had an alluring gait which drew Emma's gaze to Regina's hips. "What happened to breakfast?"

"There are more important things to attend to."

"Breakfast is the most important meal of the day," Emma offered lamely.

"Which is why you skipped it, I suppose. You punish yourself, do you not?"

"I-" Emma fidgeted. "Okay, so sometimes, yeah. But don't we all? I mean, like, it's just why should we reward ourselves for good things, but just let bad things go?"

"What bad thing do you think you've done?"

Emma shrugged. "I dunno. But it's bad enough that you don't like me anymore."

"You've done nothing."

"Then I messed up somehow and didn't do something I was supposed to. Either way-"

"What is happening, Emma, is out of your control. It's out of mine as well."

"Can you just tell me? Make it easier on both of us?"

"I spoke with my mother this morning."

Emma waited while Regina sat down beside her. "Yeah?"

"She was rightfully upset that I missed my meeting. Thankfully, she was able to repair the damage. I have a meeting later today."

"Seriously?"

"I was a fool to think I could take a vacation."

"Stand up to her!"

"You say it like it's simple."

"I'm the master of rebellion, Regina. It is simple. You just have to not care about what they threaten you with."

"If I don't attend this meeting, then I will no longer hold my position within the company."

Emma sobered. "Well, that sucks."

"That's one way of putting it." Regina watched a muscular woman tugging three dogs down the path. The woman snapped at one of the dogs that wandered too close to Emma's shoe. She got the distinct feeling that other people had much simpler lives than she did.

"Have you ever thought of, like, doing something else?"

"Like what?"

"You're a brilliant business woman, Regina. Why do you have to work for your mom?"

"Do you really think my mother would write me a letter of recommendation? Or give my potential employer glowing feedback? If I were to walk away, she would make it impossible for me to work again."

"Are you sure? I mean, moms can kinda suck and all, but would yours really ruin your life like that?"

"She doesn't see this as my life," Regina said. "This is an extension of hers."

"My mom didn't care enough – yours cares too much. We're pretty much ready to be in a cheesy nineties sitcom."

Regina huffed. "If you're through making light of the situation-"

"I'm not making light of anything. I just… I want you to have options. Maybe this is really weird, and really soon, but, uh, if you needed somewhere to stay, or whatever, you're always welcome at my place. I'd take care of you until you figured out what you wanted to do."

"You're right. This is much too soon." Regina couldn't help but feel strangely comforted, though.

"But whatever, okay?" Emma scuffed her foot against the ground. "She's pressuring you to do what she wants, and I don't want to do that to you. So whatever. If you want to go to your meeting, we'll make it work. If you don't want to go to your meeting, we'll make it work."

Regina slowly placed her hand atop Emma's. "May I think about it?"

"Right up until you need to get to your meeting."

"It's scheduled for early this evening."

"You have until early this evening." Emma smiled and waited for Regina to look at her. "We'll make it work, no matter what, okay?"

Begrudgingly, Regina nodded. "Okay."

#

Seeing this many relatives was incredibly stressful, Emma found. She hated the superficiality of it all – some of these people hadn't given a damn about her when she disappeared, and some who knew the truth of Henry's parentage had been downright rude to her in the past. But now, with death lingering in the air around them, they all claimed to be glad to see her. She wanted to roll her eyes, but had more tact than to show her agitation. Any bad behavior would just be more for them to gossip about later.

The one part of the funeral which wasn't horrible was Regina constantly at her elbow, muttering snide comments about the relatives who tried to make nice with her. The brunette had a special knack for honing in on a person's weakness and then ripping in with voracious gusto. Emma wasn't sure if her second cousin was crying due to the occasion, or because Regina had pointed out how shrill his voice was.

"Emma, it's so good to see you."

Emma submitted to a too-tight hug and a kiss on the cheek that made her skin crawl. "Aunt Mary."

Marian drew back, eyes glistening. "It's been a while, hasn't it?"

"At least a couple years."

"Last I recall, you, Robbie, and Rubes were playing cops and robbers in the backyard."

"So more than a couple of years." Emma shrugged.

"They've been asking about you. Ruby's engaged! She wanted to know your address so she can send you an invitation."

"I move a lot."

"Where did you get your dress?" Regina lifted a haughty eyebrow. "A thrift store?"

Mary's expression faltered. "Why no. I got it from Lord and Taylor."

"I do hope you saved the receipt. While you often get what you pay for, you seem to pay a good deal more than you ought to for trash."

Emma was amazed – somehow, after hearing Mary talking for only a minute or so, Regina had zeroed in on the fact that Mary's idea of fashion relied entirely on the price tag. The woman had worn truly atrocious outfits in the past, simply because she'd spent a few hundred dollars on each article of clothing. Mary's daughter had been embarrassed on multiple occasions; Ruby had inherited their father's ability to look slick and hated that Mary looked like a fashion catastrophe.

Before Mary could get too incensed by Regina's snappy remarks, Ruby engulfed Emma in a massive hug, her arms tight and her smile goofily broad. Regina noted that Emma didn't shrink from this embrace, but rather clung to the other woman. This one, she thought, she wouldn't try to harass. Despite the formal, somber occasion, Ruby's lips were stained bright red – a choice which Regina really appreciated. Sad could still be stylish.

"Emma, please tell me you're staying a few days. We totally need to catch up." Ruby drew back and wiggled her fingers in front of Emma's face. The large diamond ring on her left hand sparkled in the light and Emma snatched Ruby's hand out of the air.

"Rubes, last year you were single and loving it. Now you're engaged? What happened?"

Ruby smiled coyly. "I found a keeper. He's around her somewhere. Speaking of figuring out what happened, though, who's this, and where did you find her?"

Regina decided to let Emma field the barrage of questions, as she'd never seen the blonde so excited about a family member before. Emma blushed. "This is Regina Mills. She's a friend. I asked her to come as, y'know, emotional support."

"Mills?" Ruby's brow furrowed. "Why does that name sound so familiar?"

Her brother slung an arm around her shoulder. "Because, darling

sister, that's the last name of the woman the old man was dealing with."

Regina frowned. "Your grandfather was speaking with a Mills woman?"

"Caroline?" He shook his head. "No, something like it, though."

"Cora?"

His eyes lit up when they fell upon her. "That's it. Hello, by the way. I'm Robin – Robbie to my friends. Would you like to be one of those?"

He was handsome, Regina thought, with a sly smile and dancing eyes. Many years ago, he would have been exactly the sort of man she would have enjoyed spending the evening with. Now, though, her eyes flitted to Emma.

"Rob, leave her alone." Emma snapped at him. She wasn't jealous and she wasn't possessive over Regina – she just knew how her cousin worked and didn't want Regina's weekend to get spoiled.

"Or," Rob chuckled, "if you're my lovely cousin, you call me Rob."

Regina noticed Emma's suddenly tense posture but kept herself from responding too strongly. She'd hate for Emma to see how invested she actually was in whatever it was that was going on between them. Robin was charming and obviously relied upon his smile to get away with everything – but she'd been taught to handle men like this from an early age.

"Robbie will do," Regina said, smirking as she spoke.

He grinned, probably thinking his ploy was working, Regina determined. "And what do your friends call you?"

"Regina Mills."

His eyes lit up. "So wait – really?"

"Yes."

"Weird coincidences, huh?" He stepped closer to her, prompting her to back away.

"I have no idea to what you are referring."

"I meet the woman I'm going to marry at a funeral." He smiled broadly. "That'll be quite the story for our grandkids."

She frowned. "That's the most presumptuous-"

"I'm not presuming anything. Our parents set it up. Didn't yours tell you? We're meant to be together."

Emma felt as though her stomach had been blasted with acid – it burned hot and then melted through her. The heat bubbled up through her chest and flickered onto her tongue. "That's some real shit, Rob. Picking up girls at your own grandfather's funeral."

"No shit, I promise." He reached forward and took her hand. "I wasn't happy about it – but now that I've seen you – damn. I don't know how long I can wait 'til the wedding."

Regina glared at him until he released her hand. "Perhaps you're unfamiliar with consent, Robbie, but you cannot have a wedding if one party is unwilling to say 'I do.'"

"Of course I know what consent is." He withdrew his hand quickly. "Of course I would never-"

Emma cleared her throat. "Rob, how about you leave my friend alone. She's got enough on her plate without you making it worse."

He tipped his head. "Sorry, but you're taking this way too seriously."

Turning to Regina, Emma frowned. What was she supposed to say, she wondered, and what would actually make the situation easier? "Regina, I had no idea, okay? He might be wrong."

Regina was stoic for a long moment, but her poise broke in the form of her lower lip quivering. Emma took her arm and guided her outside. They wouldn't be missed, she figured, and she'd take the time a little later to bid her grandfather good bye. For now, though,

she wanted Regina to be somewhere safe and out of view. Regina followed her placidly back to the van.

"This is just like my mother," Regina gritted out. "And it all makes sense now – why she was so dead set upon my attendance of that meeting. She's whoring me out to get what she wants."

"Maybe there's something else going on?" Emma lifted her hands helplessly. "We don't know yet."

"You don't know my mother."

"No, but I do know mine, and I know Rob's. They wouldn't just force you into marriage. Rob's kinda a dick sometimes, but I don't think he'd do this if he thought you were being forced."

"Your family is not who I'm worried about." Regina stared up at the sky. "If I don't do this, I lose my job. I lose everything. Not only do I have to agree, but now I have to pretend to agree to the extent that I need to convince your cousin that I'm very willing. If this falls through because of me, then I have nothing to go back to."

"There's gotta be something we can do." Emma fiddled with the hem of her shirt. This was the first decent woman she'd known in a long time, and the first person she'd wanted to be with in even longer. So of course this perfect, flawed human being wouldn't be available. Emma rubbed the back of her neck – no matter how cheated she felt by fate, Regina must feel worse.

"There's nothing. I've thought things through. I cannot walk away from the life I know. I have to do what my mother demands. I have to." Regina folded her arms protectively over her stomach. An ill feeling was descending upon her, but she had nowhere to go and nothing to do but accept that her future would never be happy or her own. Maybe, she thought, a marriage to Robbie wouldn't be that bad. According to Emma he wasn't that terrible a person, so as a husband he would more than likely be somewhat decent.

The only problem, Regina thought, was that she'd come face to face with Emma at every family party. She would have to stare down the future she wanted, while holding hands with the future she had been

given. That thought made her feel even closer to vomiting. She leaned back against the hood of the car to keep herself upright. Nothing in her life was fair, she reminded herself, so she shouldn't be surprised by this latest development.

After a moment of numb silence, Emma licked her lips and said, "Take a chance on me."

"To what end?"

Emma held her hand out. "Do you trust me?"

"What?"

"Do you trust me?"

Regina tentatively took her hand. "I do, though I'm not certain I should."

"That's good enough for me." Emma grinned at her. "I have a plan."

Chapter 5

Emma stared down at her grandfather, not sure what exactly she should be feeling. As a small child, she had adored him and clung to every word he ever said. He gave her small gifts every time he visited and taught her to fish. The older she got, however, the less she got along with him. He expected her to achieve to his standards, and she had different plans for herself. Mary-Margaret had been his favorite child, and Emma was supposed to be the second coming of her mother. When he tried to rope her into the family business, she hadn't reacted well. Things between them had remained rocky, and Emma couldn't describe how awful it felt that her grandfather had died before they had a chance to fix anything.

He looked almost like he was alive, she thought, like he could suddenly open his eyes and be totally fine. She leaned closer to his body and whispered a nearly silent apology. Tears prickled at her eyes, but she held them back. A hand on the small of her back made her jerk back.

"Em, he would have been so happy you came."

She gave her mother a watery smile. "Well, a little late, but I made it, right?"

"He forgave you a long time ago."

"I never apologized – I said a lot of things, y'know?" Emma wiped at her eyes as the stupid tears dared to trickle towards her cheeks. "Things I didn't mean."

"You were young, and he didn't understand."

Neither did Mary-Margaret, Emma thought. In the interest of sharing a moment with her mother, though, she swallowed her bitterness and smiled as honestly as she could. "I guess it doesn't matter in the long run."

"No, it doesn't. He loved you a lot, Em. He told me just last week that he missed having you around more."

Emma let out a long, slow sigh. She stepped away from Mary-Margaret and nodded – hearing that firmed her resolve. Her plan would work, she was fairly certain, especially given her grandfather's preference for her mother and her. There was constant family pressure for her to join the business, to which she had heretofore been immune, but there was a new impetus working on her. If she took up the family mantle, she could interfere with the marriage arrangement. She could take Robin's place, and then give Regina the space and freedom she required. This would mean the end of her own lifestyle, but she figured that they could divorce amicably once the deal between their companies was sealed – and they could both go back to their lives.

"This has really made me start thinking," Emma began, her eyes scanning the morose crowd until she spotted Regina sulking near the back wall. "I've been thinking that maybe I've spent too much time away from everyone. I love my job, but it might be time to come home."

Mary-Margaret pulled her close. The brunette's arms were somewhat like a constricting snake, and Emma winced as they crushed the breath from her lungs. She loved her mother despite their disagreements, but this was more closeness than she was comfortable with. Extricating herself carefully, she made sure to smile so that her mother's feelings weren't hurt.

"I'm so glad."

"I was hoping there was something for me to do in the business."

"Everyone is shifting up, now that…" Mary-Margaret's gaze drifted to her father, and tears gathered in her eyes once more. "Well, you know. There's space for you, Em."

"I'd need a month or so to relocate here."

"We'll hold it for you." She kissed Emma's temple. "This is going to be the start of something good, I can feel it."

Emma walked through the throngs of her family, tilting her head in greeting, skittering away from those with whom she didn't wish to

speak, and murmuring apologies to any person she accidentally jilted in her hurry to reach Regina's side. The dark haired woman was anxious after their conversation, and that nervousness hadn't faded in the few minutes Emma had used to say good bye to her grandfather. Regina's eyes locked on her as she drew nearer.

"I'd like to know your brilliant plan."

Emma jammed her hands into her pockets. "I told my mom that I wanted to work for the family business."

Regina's mind worked quickly, but she wasn't sure how this connected to her plight. "So?"

"So, if your mom wants to cement a deal between you company and my family's, does the marriage have to be with Robin?" She shrugged, drawing her lower lip between her teeth and gnawing a moment before continuing. "I thought maybe it could be with, well, me."

Regina appraised her, a frown forming over her lips. "This doesn't solve the problem."

"It stops you from marrying someone you don't know."

"Ms. Swan, I don't know you, either. We met a day ago, or had you forgotten?"

"You know me well enough to believe me when I say that I don't expect anything from you. We get married, our companies play nice, and then when it's safe, or whenever you want to pull the trigger, we walk away. I promise, Regina, this would be a marriage in title only."

Regina couldn't put into words that no matter what happened, she had lost whatever agency she imagined she had. A marriage to Emma was infinitely more appealing than one to Robin, but she didn't want to get married at all. At the end of the day, she was doing something against her will, no matter how pretty the person slipping a ring onto her finger.

"No."

Emma stood stock still and stared at her. There had been no doubt in her mind that Regina would love her plan, yet the other woman had the audacity to deny the one plan that would eventually grant her freedom? Not to mention the fact that Emma was giving up her own freedom to work towards Regina's. Emma glowered quietly, her tongue unable to find any words to speak.

Regina folded her arms over her chest defensively. Besides, she thought, if she were to continue this fling with Emma, marriage would ultimately sour things much too quickly. They had only just met, and Regina was enjoying the lack of commitment betwixt them. She wanted that, for now at least. Things weren't complicated, unlike almost every other aspect of her life. On top of that, her hand was not up for sale in some business agreement, and she didn't want anyone dictating her life, no matter the outcome. Emma's plan was a temporary solution that did little to solve the greater ailment – her mother's cloying control.

When Emma had a plan that dealt with that, Regina would be listening. Until then, she had to figure out a way to get out of the marriage entirely. If Emma wasn't willing to help with that, then Regina would forge ahead alone. She was used to doing just that and wouldn't shy away from the work. The moment Emma had mentioned a plan, her heart had come to life with hope. That hope wasn't about to fizzle out because Emma's plan had been misguided.

"I don't understand," Emma said, her tone lost and hopeless. "I just want to help."

"Taking his place doesn't help me, Ms. Swan. After all, I am still to be married off like a chattel so that my mother can profit."

Emma frowned. "Well, it's either my plan or you quit your job. Which, may I remind you, you've already told me you're not willing to do. You said if this didn't work out, you'd have nothing to go back to."

"I was depressed," Regina huffed. She hated how stiff she currently felt. "You offered me a chance out of what I deemed a doomed situation, which then alerted me to the possibility that there may indeed exist a way out of this. Before you interrupt – I believe there's

a way out of this that doesn't involve my involuntary marriage to one of your ilk."

"You say that like marrying me or Robin would be awful."

"It simply wouldn't be my choice."

Emma threw her hands up. She hated that her idea got shut down, especially because it was her one and only idea, but she wanted to help Regina more than she wanted to use her idea. The idea of marrying Regina had been so enticing, and she'd let herself dream from a moment that they wouldn't actually divorce in the end. They'd find out how well they worked together, and then they'd have a wonderfully weird and fateful story to tell their children later about how they met. She had a tendency to put the cart before the horse, she mused. A new idea began to wriggle into her brain.

"So, I might have had a thought."

"Oh, delightful." Regina cocked an eyebrow. "Do enlighten me."

"You want out of this marriage thing, but you still want your job – but what if you had a different, just as good job?"

"Explain."

"I was thinking about how I put the cart before the horse, and how the horse has to lead the cart, right?"

Regina sighed. This was getting convoluted. "Get on with it."

"Leading!" Emma grinned at her. "What if instead of marrying into my family's business, we hired you?"

This had to be a trap, Regina thought. There had to be a pitfall somewhere that she couldn't see as of yet. The solution to her current woes could not seriously be as simple as having Emma's family hire her. There was a slight chance that her mother would not see this as a union of their companies, but the risk was small. At first glance, Emma's new plan was flawless.

"Except," Regina said after a moment of consideration, "that we

have no way of making your family hire me."

"They had a space for me-"

"Because you're family. On top of that, I doubt the position they would give you would be anything large at first. If I were to make the switch, I'd need something with a bit more power behind it." Regina hated watched the light dim in Emma's eyes, but she had always preferred confronting the truth rather than hiding behind a pleasant inaccuracy.

"I'll talk to my mom."

"This has to happen now. We have until that meeting in a few hours to figure out our next move."

"I know that's not a lot of time, but talk moves fast in my family." Emma set a hand on Regina's forearm. "You asked me earlier why I'm doing all this for you, and I'm sure that you're still just as curious, especially now that I'm doing more."

Regina nodded and met Emma's gaze. "The question has been present in my mind. This goes much further than simply giving me a weekend to relax."

"Wanna go back outside?" Emma glanced around her family and spotted Robbie heading straight for them. Without waiting for an answer, she guided Regina back outside. To avoid Robbie following them, she headed around the corner where nobody could see them talking.

"I suppose what you want to tell me has something to do with your family?"

"Yeah…" Emma closed her eyes and took a slow, deep breath. Technically speaking, she hadn't known Regina very long, and she had known others for longer with whom she would never trust any sensitive information. Something about Regina inspired her trust, though, so she forced herself onward. Regina did, after all, already know about Henry. When it came to family secrets, having her mother raise her son was about as dark as it got for her.

"Well?"

"When everything happened with Henry being born and me running away, I was pretty hopeless. I thought I had pretty much hit the worst part of my life. I left home, but I didn't know what I was going to do. I had nowhere to go and nobody to turn to." Emma cleared her throat and opened her eyes. She found Regina staring stoically back at her. She had expected some form of empathy, but she found very little of anything in Regina's gaze. Still, she had started talking, she knew she ought to finish. "For the first few months, I was bouncing from couch to couch until my friends got tired of me being around. Then I was homeless for a short while. My parents never knew this, and I'd rather they never find out. They think I left because I got a job as a pilot, but in reality I left because I couldn't stand it. If they knew I had nothing when I left, they'd… they'd look at me different. I'm already a disappointment."

"How did you become a pilot?"

"There was one night when I got to the shelter too late and all the beds had been given away. I went to a local park to sleep on a bench. I had just curled up when a stranger approached. At first I thought he was a cop trying to move me along, and then I was afraid that he was a bad person looking to hurt me – but he wasn't either."

"Who was he?"

"His name was August. He had been where I was once, and he said that he wanted to help. He took me to his apartment – and before you say anything, yeah, I know I was probably really stupid for going – but it was a cold night, and he didn't seem dangerous. I think that's what all attempted-murder victims say…" Emma laughed uneasily. "He slept on the couch that night so I could sleep in his bed. In the morning, he helped me figure out what I could do with my life."

"You got lucky." Regina tucked her hands under her arms to keep them warm. The air wasn't too cold, but her hands had the tendency to freeze quickly. She did appreciate Emma's story, but she wished they could have talked somewhere inside. "I'm quite glad you ran into August and not some sort of creep."

"Me, too." Emma smiled at the memory of her old friend and cleared her throat. "Anyway, he got me onto the right track and got me an interview once I had a pilot's license – and from there it's history. I asked him once why he helped me, and he told me that someone had once done the same thing for him. He made me promise to pay it forward."

"And I suppose that's what you're doing now?"

"Over the years, I've done little things for people – like buying coffee for the car behind me at the Starbucks drive-thru. But you're the first one I've done something this big."

"Why now?"

"August passed away last year, right around this time. Nobody knew what he did for me, so I didn't have anyone to mourn with when I found out. I felt like an ass all this time, but I think I finally found the right way to honor him."

"That's very noble of you," Regina stated, her voice flat and her eyes narrowed, "but completely unnecessary."

"I don't care what is or isn't necessary. I did this on a whim, to try and give to someone else what he gave to me. But now that I know you, even after such a short period of time, I can't just look away. Too many people do that. You know they do. Someone has a problem, and it's messy, so it's easiest to pretend like you don't see it. I'm doing the hard thing, Regina. I'm looking at your mess, and I've got a mop."

"Your mop comes with a ring and a commitment I'm not willing to make."

"Which is why I also have a broom where you don't have to marry me at all. Look, the metaphor is really getting in the way, okay? The thing is, I'm going to help you. Maybe you're not used to people helping you – maybe you're used to people averting their eyes – but I'm staying with you. I'm going to fight until the end until you get exactly what you want."

"How? We have so little time-"

"Trust me. Gimme a few minutes with my mom, okay?"

"I thought you two had some issues."

"At the end of the day, my family would kill for one another. I may not be her favorite person, and she's definitely not mine, but if I need something, she's going to make it happen for me. That's what family does."

"Must be nice."

"You tell me." Emma set her hand on Regina's forearm. "You're my family now, so you're in on this, too. Got it?"

Regina met her gaze and swallowed past the growing lump in her throat. This was not how her family functioned in the slightest, and the idea that now she was part of a group of people who truly cared for one another despite the drama and fighting was frightening. Still, she didn't look away. "Got it."

Chapter 6

As they sat in the car, Mary-Margaret kept her eyes moving over Regina's face. For a short period of time, Regina ignored the behavior in favor of looking out the window. Eventually, though, her ire was rankled, and she grumbled low in her throat as she turned her face to meet Mary-Margaret's gaze head-on.

"Can I help you?"

"I need to know what you are to my daughter."

"A friend."

Mary-Margaret leaned forward. "She's asked me to do a huge favor for you. I deserve to know if you're using her to meet your own goals. She's my daughter, and I want to make sure she's happy."

"Is that why you forced her to give up Henry?" The words popped out before Regina could stop them. Still, Emma was doing so much for her – the least she could do was stand up for Emma even when Emma was too cowed or ashamed to do so for herself.

"Is that what she told you happened? I didn't force her-"

"But you didn't make the choice of keeping him sound tantalizing, I'm sure. Did you threaten to remove your financial support if she didn't bend to your wishes?"

A ruddy hue flooded Mary-Margaret's cheeks. "No."

"I suppose she simply awoke one morning and saw the wisdom in your wishes. Naturally, she did what you wanted because you asked it of her." Regina noted that she might be ruining the success of Emma's plan, but now that she had started, she couldn't make herself stop. Emma deserved to have someone fight for her. "She would have made a great mother."

"She was young. I protected her. We'll never know if they'd have been better off together, but they're both safe and happy now as it

is." Mary-Margaret huffed and folded her arms over her chest. "Emma knows that I was just trying to do what was best for her."

"Interesting," Regina replied, "because the way she speaks about the issue leads me to believe that she knows no such thing."

Mary-Margaret gaped silently for a moment. At Regina's sharp comment that she was going to start catching flies if she continued, she snapped her jaw shut and glared at the other woman. She wondered where Regina got the nerve to sit in her car, awaiting a favor from her no less, and to insult her decisions. She owed this woman nothing, not even kindness, yet she was considering offering Regina –

Her thoughts derailed. Though her feelings were hurt, she recognized how horrible a forced marriage might be. She had narrowly escaped one herself – so no matter how distasteful she thought Regina was treating her, she had to smile and bear the nasty words. She turned her face to the window and decided to not communicate further with Regina. Emma may like her, she thought, but she found Regina too prickly.

The door swung open, and Emma slid into the back seat. Immediately, she picked up on the tension in the vehicle and cocked an eyebrow. "Is everything okay in here?"

"Fine," the two brunettes answered in unison.

Mary-Margaret gripped the steering wheel tightly and peeled off into traffic. Emma glanced at how stiffly Regina was sitting and sighed. "Okay, so clearly something happened. You can either tell me, or I can start making guesses."

"We had a minor disagreement, that's all." Mary-Margaret tried to smile but was clenching her teeth too tightly together for the expression to look natural.

"About?"

Regina rolled her eyes. Mary-Margaret was too used to lying by omission when telling Emma the truth was the better option. "I told

her that you were hurt by what happened when Henry was born."

"You what!?"

"She assured me that you knew that she did what she did for your benefit, and I minorly disagreed."

Emma stuttered out several sounds that almost formed words before Regina cut back in once more, "I apologize if I overstepped my bounds, Emma, but you've done so much for me, that I wanted to return the favor. The fact is that, from what I know of the situation, you were pressured into a decision you did not want to make. Regardless of intent, this has had an enormous impact on your family dynamic.

"My hope was not to cause trouble, but to perhaps mend what was previously broken. You may have slapped a bandage over the wound, however the blood is still not coagulating properly."

"Regina…" Emma licked her lips and rubbed the back of her neck. "I mean, I guess I understand, but we need my mom to help you – and you just –" She glanced at Mary-Margaret, who was staring stolidly out the windshield. "You were supposed to play nice so she'd agree."

"I do apologize," Regina repeated, "but there doesn't seem to be anyone in your life who wants you to be happy."

"That's not fair," Mary-Margaret snapped.

"I don't mean by your standards," Regina riposted. "I mean by hers. She is the only one who knows what happiness is for her, and your meddling does nothing but make her life harder. Not only does she have no one protecting her interests, but you expect her to protect yours. I am through sitting by and watching this occur. Until she is able to do so for herself, I am hereby naming myself her guardian."

Emma flushed bright red. "Regina…"

Mary-Margaret applied the brake with a little more force than necessary to stop for a red light. She twisted a bit to stare Regina down. "I have half a mind to pull over now."

"Very well." Regina stared back without flinching. "That will not change the truth of what I've said."

"That's why I'm still going to help you," Mary-Margaret replied. She eased the car forward and frowned. "Your opinion on our family dynamics aside, I wouldn't be able to sleep at night if I turned my back on someone in need."

Regina couldn't begin to describe the relief filtering through her chest, so she simply tilted her head graciously and resumed watching buildings fly by. This plan might not work, she told herself, so she ought to prepare herself for marriage. She wasn't sure if she'd marry Robin or Emma – given the circumstances, her mother might insist on the original agreement to punish her. If she were honest with herself, though, she had to admit that one of the reasons this was so disastrous to her was that a marriage to Robin would mean she couldn't date Emma.

She turned slightly to watch Emma from the corner of her eye. The blonde was fluctuating between an expression of confusion and one of frustration. She was responsible for that, she noted, but there was little she could do in that moment to fix anything. She sighed.

"What's the plan?" Emma broke the silence between the three of them moments later. "I mean, I know what the goal is, but what is the plan?"

Mary-Margaret turned a turn signal on and then pulled smoothly into a parking garage. "I'm stepping down and recommending that the board hire Regina to fill my position."

"Recommending?" Regina cocked an eyebrow. "That's hardly-"

"It's basically an order," Emma interrupted. "This is a family business, Regina. If Mom asks the board to do something, they'll do it."

"Why would you do that? Why would you give up your job for me?"

"You may have a low opinion of me, but I do want my children happy." Mary-Margaret fought to keep her voice steady. "I've made

plenty of mistakes in the past, but we can only try to be better in the present and in the future."

Emma waited until Mary-Margaret had exited the car before leaning forward and placing her hand on Regina's shoulder. When the brunette met her gaze, she offered a genuine smile that trembled at the edges.

"You didn't have to do that, y'know?"

"I am well aware of what is expected of me – as well as what isn't." Regina covered Emma's hand with her own. "You have been an advocate for my happiness, so I didn't think it fair to not return the favor if I had the opportunity."

"Still, if my mom weren't so understanding, you might have ended up married." Emma grinned to show that she was saying that in good humor. "We all know that your life is pretty much over when you get married. All the fun dies."

"Considering that I wasn't having fun to begin with, I don't think that's much of a change." Regina smiled back with much the same intent.

"So my spontaneous vacation didn't do anything for you?"

"Not in the slightest," Regina teased.

"And me? Did I do anything for you?" Emma wiggled her eyebrows in case Regina missed the not-so-subtle double meaning of her words.

Regina snorted. "You did plenty, my dear."

"Maybe, when this is all over, you and me could take a real vacation." Emma cleared her throat and looked sheepishly at the other woman. "I mean, if you want to trust the stranger you met a few days ago a little more?"

"I get the feeling that everything with you is an adventure. Would you be willing to vacation some place where solitude is actually an option?"

"I know it's cheesy and all, but I'd go anywhere as long as you were there, too."

"You're right – that's very cheesy." Regina moved to open the car door. "But the sentiment is sweet."

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"This board of directors meeting has been called with special purpose." Mary-Margaret examined the faces around her. "I recently found out that my father had arranged a merger with another company, not through business means but through marriage. While this may have been perfectly reasonable to him, I have to disagree. He ran this business successful through decades in the past, but now we are in a different era, and I want to do things properly."

"Between whom was the wedding?"

Emma glanced at the speaker, confirmed his identity as one of her great uncles, and turned her attention back to her mother. Though this was her plan, she had to rely upon Mary-Margaret to see it through. She slid her hand along Regina's thigh and squeezed gently. Regina didn't visibly react, as she kept her eyes trained on the meeting, but she shifted her leg closer to Emma's.

"Regina Mills, daughter of Cora Mills who heads Mills International, was to wed Robin."

Great uncle scoffed momentarily. "Sounds like a match to me. We could use their reach and business."

"A link between our families will be formed. Our businesses will create joint ventures and will benefit one another."

A younger woman with a shock of dark hair and intelligent eyes appraised Mary-Margaret before lifting her hand and speaking. "How do you propose to do that without honoring the marriage agreement?"

"In a few minutes, we will have Cora Mills on the line. Before this occurs, I need your support. I am going to step down from my position." Mary-Margaret lifted her hands to sooth the sudden rush

of chatter. "Don't panic - I will still work for the company, so very little will change. In my stead, I ask you to hire Regina Mills and elect her to the board."

"Preposterous!"

"Invite an outsider into our ranks? Soon enough we won't be a family business!"

Regina let the negative remarks flow around her as her heart plummeted to her feet. This had been a long shot, she told herself. She had been mentally preparing for such a result, but hearing the crushing of her hope was much worse than she expected. The air had been ripped from her lungs, and she sat stock still, sucking in short, gasping breaths. The hand on her thigh tightened until she shot Emma a sharp look.

"Regina, I promised you I'd get you out of this, and I'm going to." Emma grinned at her. "You stood up for me, so now it's my turn to stand up for you again. Got it?"

"Emma…"

Without waiting to hear Regina speak, Emma leapt to her feet and lifted her hands in the air. For a few seconds, nobody noticed – but eventually a hush fell over the room. Emma hated feeling on display but barreled forward anyway.

"I know I'm not any of your favorite persons, but I am family, and that does count for something in this room. By weird happenstance, Regina Mills is my girlfriend. We started dating before she knew about the proposed marriage, and now we're looking at an abrupt end to what's turning into a really good thing. You all know that I've had a rough go of it – are you really willing to make my life worse for no reason?"

"You're asking us to-"

"I know," she interrupted her second cousin, "that I'm asking a lot. But what if this was Elsa?" She glanced at another cousin and caught his eye. "Your Terrence? Would you want your children

married off as part of a business deal? What year is this?"

"Twenty-fourteen," a particularly snarky relative put in. He immediately flushed and bowed his head. "Sorry."

"If you can't bring yourself to protect Regina's interests, then protect mine," Emma concluded, her eyes scanning her relatives. She tried to smile but failed. "This is the first time things have been going my way in a long time. No matter how uncomfortable I make you, I'd hope you wouldn't wish harm on me. I'd hope that you'd want me to be happy – well, Regina makes me happy, and this business deal is threatening to destroy all of that. So please. Either for me or for her, don't force this marriage."

Mary-Margaret nodded firmly and, while everyone was still nearly silent, said, "This won't be that big of a change. As I said, I'll still be an active part of the company. We will have a deal with a major company to expand our holdings, and Regina will have her freedom. I know she will be an asset to our company, as she's been nothing but an asset to my daughter."

"Let her speak for herself."

Emma glared at the family member who dared speak out, but Regina set a hand on her arm and stood. "Very well. I graduated from Harvard Business School five years ago at the top of my class. Since then, I've worked tirelessly in my mother's company and done whatever needed doing. I've devoted my life to the business world, and I'm now realizing just what I will not do for the betterment of my company: I'm not willing to sacrifice my independence or my happiness. If you allow me into your company, I promise I will provide you with every ounce of my education and expertise. I want you to succeed, but I will not marry your relative in order to make that happen."

"Well?" Mary-Margaret nibbled on her lower lip and smiled hesitantly. "Shall we vote?"

Regina shut her eyes, tilted her head down, and counted the seconds as Mary-Margaret conducted the vote. She didn't care if this worked or not, she told herself. She would find a way to survive

the coming months, with or without Emma Swan and her gaggle of family members. She wasn't fond of them in the slightest. Her weekend had been full of drama and awkward moments, rather than the relaxation Emma promised. Yet her traitorous heart had indeed formed attachments to Emma, and to Henry, and even, grudgingly to David and Mary-Margaret. They were the family she had lacked as a child.

She let out a shaky breath. She wasn't allowed to hope for the impossible – better to expect the worst and therefore not be let down when her chance at freedom was crushed. Should they vote her in, she would still face the battle of convincing her mother, an obstacle she was not looking forward to overcoming. Getting these people to let her into their family-run business was like the warm-up and speaking with Cora was going to be the marathon. Regina squeezed her eyes even harder.

"Relax," Emma murmured. "This is almost over."

"Hmph."

"Where do you want to go on our vacation?"

"What? This is hardly the appropriate time to-"

"Somewhere warm and sunny – a beach, maybe?" Emma hemmed and hawed for a moment. "Or what about some sort of snowy vacation where you could learn to ski while I snowboarded and then we could cuddle together in front of a fire and drink hot chocolate."

"I…" Regina's brain rerouted. "I dislike beaches. Sand gets everywhere. I've never been skiing."

"Really? I woulda thought you were the type."

"The type?" Regina huffed. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"You're pretty and your family's a little loaded. I guess I pictured you zooming down snowy mountains in a designer snow suit."

"My mother and father did take many trips, but I was never afforded the opportunity to do much. They had earned their fortune, after all,

and I had done nothing to deserve the finer things in life." Regina swallowed hard and shrugged. "They went skiing and left me to make snow angels by the lodge. I may not have participated in the more adventurous parts of vacationing, but I made due."

"Good thing you're dating a pilot." Emma winked. "I can get you a really good deal for all your flying needs. I can even show you my cockpit."

"You're vile," Regina retorted, but her lips curled up into a smile. "You haven't been that forward with your double entendre since we first met."

"I laid off after a while because I already had you in my clutches. I didn't want to scare you away, after all. Now, though, this is the perfect chance to lure you further into my thrall."

"Are you a vampire?" Regina opened one eye and watched the way Emma's grin flickered across Emma's lips. The expression made her feel better, she noted, which was vaguely alarming. She hadn't known this woman very long, but she felt as though Emma were a blanket on a cold winter morning. "Or perhaps a Siren?"

"My silly innuendos are a song, huh? Believe me, you really don't want to hear me sing. So is it working? Are my words coaxing you closer?"

"I can safely say this is the closest I have ever been with anyone," Regina admitted. "You're the first person who has made me feel safe."

"I'd like to keep doing that as long as you'll let me." Emma glanced up. "Which will hopefully be a lot longer than previously thought – the voting's done."

"And?" Regina closed her eyes once more and held her breath.

"You're in."

The effect was immediate – though she had tried so hard not to hope for her freedom to be handed to her, optimism pooled in her stomach and her lips curled up at the edges. She stared at Emma,

and Emma beamed right back at her. For a moment, they were the only two in the room; when Emma kissed her, Regina gave no thought the people around them and just sank into the embrace, her hands curling around Emma's biceps.

"That's the first step," Emma murmured in her ear after a few seconds. "But after that, I know we can do anything."

Reality was cruel, Regina realized. She couldn't let this sudden burst of optimism derail the honest truth that Cora Mills was not usually in the mood to cater to her whims, and this plan not only blasted a hole in Cora's plan, but also substituted something different, all without once talking to Cora. Mother would feel attacked, Regina thought, which would make her defensive. There had to be a way of framing this as Cora's idea.

Regina pulled out of Emma's arms and walked to Mary-Margaret's side. Setting a hand on the shorter woman's arm, she leaned close and whispered, "When my mother calls, I need you to say something very specific to her. Can you do that?"

"I can try." Mary-Margaret gazed at her with earnest eyes. "I meant what I said earlier – I may not have been perfect in the past, but I'm going to do better. I'm going to do whatever it takes to get you through this."

Regina swallowed hard. "Mother will be affronted if we announce this new deal without warning. What needs to happen is you will tell her that with you father's death, his business dealings will be renegotiated as needed. An arranged marriage is no longer on the table, but you still want a deal with her company."

"Will she suggest we hire you? Won't she be suspicious that we've already voted this through?"

Regina fought to keep her cool – this was so simple to her that Mary-Margaret's ignorance was grating. She let out a long, slow breath before responding, "We hold a mock vote and vote me into the position with her watching. And yes, I hope she will. It will all depend upon how badly she wants this deal with your company."

"She did mention she had other options for breaching the market in this area…"

"Make yourself invaluable." Regina couldn't believe she had to coach the other woman through this, but a quick glance at Emma reminded her of why they were all going through this. "Sweeten the deal, if you must."

"How?" Mary-Margaret thought hard for a moment and then answered her own question without allowing Regina's response. "I suppose we change the cut from forty-sixty to thirty-seventy."

"We can't do that," a relative complained. "Our business is going down enough as it is – we don't need to slash our profits for some-"

"We aren't slashing profits," Mary-Margaret argued. She flushed. "Well, in a sense we are. But we are also gaining a wider distribution and lower production costs. If we weren't gaining anything, we wouldn't have even wanted the deal in the first place. Even thirty percent of our expected joint venture is nothing to sneeze at."

"Additionally, you'll have my guidance, knowledge, and experience." Regina eyed the woman who had spoken and decided that she was going to show each and every one of them how capable she was. She hadn't felt this sort of competitiveness in many years – and she was surprised by how exciting the opportunity to show off was.

"I guess…"

Mary-Margaret headed for the computer; she woke up the projector, brought up the video communication program, and sent out a request to speak with Cora Mills.

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"Punctual."

Regina took a deep breath as her mother's voice washed over her. She had heard that voice almost every day for her entire life, but this was the first time she was going to fight back with hopefully positive results. This moment didn't feel quite real, she reflected, but she knew how hard Emma had worked and understood the sacrifice.

Cora eyed the room and then continued. "I like that in a business partner. It's remarkable, truly, how few companies bother with timeliness."

"It's next to cleanliness," Mary-Margaret offered. "Thank you for taking time from your busy day to speak with us."

"As I understand it, you were all attending a funeral not too long ago. My apologies." Though her words were apologetic, there was nothing in Cora's tone that sounded anything like empathy.

"Thank you," Mary-Margaret repeated.

"As to our current business – I'm sure you have all been briefed about the plans between our companies."

"We have… Unfortunately, a change needs to happen."

Cora's eyes narrowed and scanned the room. Upon spotting Regina, her lip curled up derisively. "Has she begged for your mercy?"

"Nothing of the sort. We simply want what's best for all parties involved, and we want our deal to be with the times. A marriage may not be as binding as we want. However, we do still value your partnership and realize we need your presence if our business is to move forward."

Cora sat silently, her dark eyes trained on Regina. When she spoke again, her voice was flat. "I suppose you already have an alternative?"

"We hadn't thought about it-"

"Quiet." Cora sniffed and shook her head. "I'm sure my daughter has convinced you of a good many things this evening. I'm sure she's filled your heads with all sorts of fantastic claims of her brilliance and her usefulness."

"They're not just claims." Emma leapt to her feet but resisted the urge to rush at the screen. She clenched her hands into fists. "She's every bit as good as she says she is and ten times more."

Cora's gaze dissected her, but Emma refused to back down or show her discomfort. After a moment, Cora snorted and shook her head. "I suppose you are the tart that put these fantasies in Regina's head?"

"Yeah, I guess I am." Emma bristled. "If by fantasies you mean realistic expectations for what her life should and can be."

"She's meant for more than you can offer-"

"I think we're getting off track," Mary-Margaret interrupted. "Do you wish to do business with my company or not?"

"After the rude conduct of this young woman, I believe the answer is no."

That blow hit its mark – Emma backed down and took her seat once more. Her family already thought she was problematic, and now she had screwed up one of the biggest deals they would probably ever get. She couldn't bring herself to look at their faces, but she had a pretty strong feeling that they were glaring at her. She wasn't sure if she'd ever be invited to family functions again, not that she was terribly interested in attending, but she didn't want to lose her family entirely.

She sucked in short breaths, though she knew doing so would make her lightheaded. Deep breaths were just too difficult. Her panic only faded when a hand landed on her knee – she glanced up and met her mother's gaze.

"Don't listen to her," Mary-Margaret murmured. "I know I haven't set the best example over the years, but I really do believe you need to stick up for what you believe is right. There's nothing wrong with fighting for your family and friends."

"If that's all we have to talk about, then I'm finished wasting my time-"

"We're not done," Regina stated. She locked her hands behind her back, fought her fear, and faced her mother. She had never been brave enough before, but Emma had emboldened her to be more

than she thought she could. She could and she would stand up to Cora and make this deal happen. "You're right, Mother. I did work with these people on a different deal that would benefit both our companies without fringing upon my freedoms. If you had bothered to ask, they were willing to cut a very lucrative deal with you regarding profits. But you don't care about business, do you?"

"I have no idea what you're-"

"You care about making my life misery." Regina was proud of how steady her voice was. "You told me over and over through the years that your being pregnant with me was the worst thing that could have happened to you. I ruined your chance at true success. So here, Mother, allow me to give that chance back to you. I'm staying here under the employ of this fine company. They will split with you fifty-fifty, which is, of course, a worse deal than you would have gotten if you weren't intent on treating me like disposable property. If you do not agree, then I am still staying here and devoting my time and education to the betterment of this company. You'll lose not only this deal, but my expertise as well. If you agree, at least you walk away with something. You tried for so long to control me, and you succeeded for too long. Threaten all you want that I can't come home – I've got news for you, Mother. My home is not with you."

"I suppose you think your home is with her?"

Regina glanced at Emma, who was flushed and grinning, and nodded stiffly. "It is."

"You've only known her-"

"I don't care, Mother. I've known her a handful of days compared to a lifetime with you, and she knows more about me than you ever will. So throw whatever little fit you want or need. I'm staying here. Whether you benefit from the arrangement is totally up to you." The hot air fueling her abruptly disappeared. Becoming cognizant that her rant had an audience of Emma's family members, Regina swallowed hard but tried to maintain an appearance of confidence.

"You'll come crawling back-"

"No, Mother, I won't." Regina tilted her head up. "I know I'm worth more than that."

Cora glared at her, and she could tell from the expression that her mother would very much so like her existence to end. "Very well, you ungrateful child. Stay with this dead end of a company. There is no deal here. I-"

Regina stalked to the computer, ended the call, and stood, panting and waiting for the board's reaction. At first there was silence, but gradually family members began to murmur amongst themselves. One by one they stood up and exited the room; Regina wondered if this was a bad sign – and if she'd need to seek new employment.

"That was impressive," Emma said as she approached. She set her hands on her hips. "I wish I could tear into the people who hurt me like that."

"I've promised to be better…" Mary-Margaret looked at her with reproachful eyes.

"I know. But before, y'know?" Emma shook her head. "I like to talk big when I talk to myself, but I'd never be able to stand up for myself like that."

"Then I'll stand up for you." Having expended all her confidence in the previous conversation, Regina hesitated. "If you want me to, of course."

Emma dug her hands into her pockets and looked away, abashed. "Well, yeah. I thought I made that pretty clear."

"I do apologize for the way that turned out." Regina eyed Mary-Margaret. "I didn't meant to harm your business-"

"You were right – you are valuable to our company." Mary-Margaret shrugged. "While that deal would have been great, I'm sure you'll help us expand in other directions. Some of the relatives might be a bit sour for a while, but there will be other deals."

"So…" Emma knocked gently against Regina. "You've gotten a new job, you've conquered your mother, and you've tamed my wild spirit.

What's next?"

"I suppose I have to head home and gather my belongings."

"What, we aren't going on vacation first?" Emma smirked. "Might be best to let things cool down with Mother dearest for a while. I hear Switzerland's nice this time of year."

"I didn't bring my passport."

"I hear Colorado's nice this time of year," Emma amended. "So what do you say? They need some time here to process the changes, and you can't just go home and get your stuff just yet – so come on. Let's get away for a few days."

"You're having a negative influence upon me, Emma Swan."

"Been a card carrying bad influence since eighth grade, just ask any of my friends' parents," Emma boasted. She waggled her eyebrows. "Is that a yes? I happen to know a pilot who could get us a pretty good deal on tickets, even on short notice."

"Very well." Regina tried to make it sound as if this were an imposition but struggled – vacationing with Emma sounded too pleasant to act completely disappointed by the proposition. "Given our options, Colorado sounds lovely."

"Great." Emma slid a hand around Regina's waist and guided the brunette toward the door.

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Regina stared up at the board announcing flight times and scowled. How was it, she wondered, that airlines could get away with such flagrant disregard for the schedules of their customers? If she ran a business in such a manner, she would end up broke – but instead, these people got away with delaying flight after flight.

"Don't pout like that," Emma teased. "Your face might freeze that way."

Regina snorted and rolled her eyes. "You fly those hunks of

machinery, don't you? So tell me, why is that none of them ever seem to be on time?"

"Does it matter right now?" Emma tugged on Regina's hips until the brunette was flush against her. "We've got all the time in the world right now."

Regina examined her expression before leaning up for a kiss. Emma accepted the affection eagerly, and when the moment was over, she tucked her chin onto Regina's shoulder and held the other woman in a loose embrace. Regina pulled away, aware that they were in a very public place.

"Emma-"

"So we can fuck in a park, but we can't hug in an airport." Emma laughed but backed off.

Regina coughed loudly and turned away. Though she had been in an airport not but three days ago, the circumstances couldn't be more different. Coming into the east coast had felt like doom; leaving it with Emma beside her felt like freedom.

"You're thinking hard. Anything you want to share with the class?"

Regina shrugged. "I was considering what might have occurred if you hadn't stopped me from speaking with that woman about the delay in our flight."

"Speaking? I think you were harassing."

"Semantics." Regina waved her hand. "Your intervention was so irritating, but… knowing now how things have ended up, I'm very glad you stepped in when you did."

"That's the way life is, I think. Good things feel like bad things at first because they're strange and new – and it's not easy, but it's for the best."

"I'm dating a philosopher."

"Well, I'm not that deep…"

Seeing her chance to turn the tables, Regina smirked. "I beg to differ."

Emma kissed her again and dragged her off to the terminal to wait for their flight. Regina followed after, feeling lighter, and not just because they had checked their baggage. A little delay wasn't that big a problem, she decided, especially when she had Emma to keep her company.

Fin.